

山形石雄

Illustration

宮城

4

六花勇者

D
デジタル
ストーリー

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アドレット

Adlet







フレミー
Fremy

ロロニア
Rolonia





モーラ
Mora



ナッシュェタニア
Nashetania

ゴルドフ

Goldof



ハンス

Hans





チャモ
Chamo



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Prologue

He couldn't move his arms.

He couldn't move his legs, either. He couldn't speak, nor could he lift up his body. His eyelids, his brow, his mouth, his tongue, his shoulders, his chest, his upper body—he couldn't move any of them.

At the moment, his body was lying atop the cold earth. His mouth was gaping wide, and his arms and legs were thrown haphazardly to the sides as he stared up at the dark ceiling. A drop of liquid fell from the ceiling and hit him on the tip of his nose. But his face didn't wince; it didn't even twitch.

However, he was alive.

#

He was in a corner of the expansive mountainous zone located in the northern area of the center of the Wailing Demon Territory. It was where one of the Majin's tentacles had hit the Saint of the Single Flower in the stomach a long time ago, after which she had stopped breathing and collapsed. And from then on, the land had been called the Fainting Mountains.

A northern wind blew from the ocean, turning the air frigid. And due to the Majin's toxins, all of the land had been dyed dark red.

Among the sea of trees at the base of the mountain was an enormous cave. And he was lying within.

If an ordinary person had seen his body, they would probably have wanted to look away automatically.

His skin was extremely dry and ashen. A part of his flesh was peeling off disgustingly, showing the flesh and fat beneath his skin. His flesh was rotting and turning a darkish color.

His dirty hair was unkempt and growing wildly. His crude clothing was dried out, like an old rag.

But an ordinary person's eyes would have been drawn to the back of his neck. There was a giant insect clinging to his flesh. It was a parasite about the size of a dagger, with a rough, bony body and the wings of a mayfly, and it had its tentacles and legs buried deep into his body.

Left in that way, it seemed like he was nothing more than a corpse.

However, he was alive.

#

The cave he laid in was illuminated by a small lamp hanging from the ceiling. Its feeble glow cast a faint light on a truly bizarre sight.

Filling the wide, artificially level cave floor were lines of corpses. Each was in the same position as him, lying down and staring straight up to the ceiling. Male, female, old, young—the corpses came in all shapes and sizes. But all of them were just as dried out and rotting as he was, and each one had a parasite attached to the back of their neck, the same as he did.

There were probably one hundred or two hundred of them, and they were all arranged vertically and horizontally in a neat array.

He was lying near the middle of one of the lines of corpses.

And he was alive.

#

He was unable to move or say anything, so on the surface, it seemed like he was no different than all the other corpses. However, there was one thing that was different between him and the others.

He still had a mind that could think.

As he stared up at the dark ceiling and focused on the sounds of dripping water and other things, he had one single thought.

I have to save the Heroes of the Six Flowers.

He knew that at the moment, the Flowers were falling into unprecedented danger. What the Heroes of 700 years ago and the Heroes of 300 years ago had to overcome simply could not be compared to the dreadful predicament the current group was in.

And perhaps the Flowers still hadn't realized to what extent the Kyoma commander known as Tgurneu had accomplished the impossible.

The Six Flowers were warriors with the power to save the world. They probably possessed unparalleled perceptiveness and superhuman Saint powers. Nevertheless, it didn't seem like those abilities would be able to fathom the depths of Tgurneu's trump card. It was hard to believe that what Tgurneu was using could even exist.

He knew that he was the only one who could tell the Flowers about Tgurneu's plan. In fact, he knew that he was the only person in the entire world who knew the truth of the plot. So if he didn't save the Heroes, the world would fall to ruin.

He could not move his body. His hands, legs, mouth, fingers—he couldn't move a single body part. Yet the fate of the world was resting on his shoulders.

It was not a question of if he could do it or not. He absolutely had to accomplish that goal. He had to save the Heroes of the Six Flowers. No matter how difficult it was to see the light, he absolutely believed that there was hope.

He needed to tell them what Tgurneu had created—his absolute trump card.

He had to tell them the truth of the Black Barren Flower.





Chapter One
The Saint of Time
and
The Baren Flower

Chapter One: Part One

It was the seventeenth night after the Majin had reawakened. In a corner of the Forest of Severed Fingers, eight people were sitting in circle and listening to what Dozzu had to say.

"At the moment, Nashetania possesses the first fake crest. Originally, that was given to me by Hayuha, the Saint of Time."

Dozzu then stopped for a moment and looked over everyone's faces.

"Before I tell you the clue to defeat the seventh, I have to tell you about Hayuha. Is a detailed explanation of Hayuha necessary?"

"Umeow, I don't need one. Even I know the name Hayuha," Hans said.

Fremy also shook her head, indicating she didn't need the explanation either. For the other companions that went without saying. But that should have been expected. Even children on the continent knew the name Hayuha.

The Saint of Time, Hayuha Pressio. She was one of the members of the second group of Six Flowers. She was the greatest force against the Majin's attack, and her efforts were preserved in detailed written records by the survivor of that conflict, the Saint of Blades, Marie.

It was said that anything Hayuha touched could manipulate time. Thus, after receiving her touch, for a brief period of time her companions were able to move several times faster than normal. Enemies touched by her would not be able to move faster than a fraction of their usual speed.

Though the ability itself could not wound or kill the enemy, it was the greatest power at the Heroes' disposal. If she could just touch her opponent, then, regardless of who she was facing, they would become powerless. As such, it is widely accepted that the victory of the second group of Flowers would not have been possible without her.

The records also state that she had quite an eccentric personality. She would wrap herself in a robe covered in childlike scribbles and wear a large wooden bowl as a hat. She was constantly wearing mismatched shoes on her feet, and the only true accessory she carried was a ripped handbag in her right hand.

She was also an excessive alcoholic and loved using puns and vulgar language. She always looked down on her companions, and on a whim she would act completely selfishly. Marie had bluntly recorded that such a personality, on the surface, could in no way be considered likeable.

Her current whereabouts were a giant mystery. On the way back to her hometown after defeating the Majin, she suddenly disappeared.

Having lost their way, the three surviving Saints wandered to a town close to the Wailing Demon Territory. Exhausted, they smacked their lips at the thought of eating normal human food for the first time in a long while.

Hayuha poured alcohol into the bowl she had been wearing on her head and then drowned herself in booze. She drank, then vomited, vomited, then drank. When she had drunk up all of the town's sake, Hayuha told her companions that she had to go relieve herself and then left the room.

She never returned.

No one had any idea where she went. Some theories speculated that she had been captured by the Kyoma or killed. Or she had been confined by some country's king out of fear of her powers. There were even theories that she had been killed by one of her companion Flowers, who, after some trivial love affair, had been driven mad with jealousy.

People across the continent came forward with claims of seeing someone who looked like Hayuha. But none of them could give any information to confirm that it was truly her.

The only plausible interpretation of the situation was that she had died. And yet, even after her disappearance, the Temple of Time didn't choose a new Saint. If Hayuha was still alive, then, as long as she possessed the power of the Saint, a new Saint could not take her place.

For five years searches were held to find her. None of them yielded any results. Before long the Temple of Time decided that a new Saint of Time would be selected, and Hayuha was declared deceased.

"There's no way.... Hayuha..." Mora muttered, and Dozzu nodded slightly.

"That's right. After Hayuha defeated the Majin, she returned to the Wailing Demon Territory. She wanted to find out what exactly the Majin was."

Dozzu suddenly broke off eye contact and hung his head. From his profile, Adlet no longer thought the Kyoma seemed adorable. He just saw loneliness in the Kyoma instead.

"Hayuha came about a month after the Majin had fallen. She had a large wine cask slung over her shoulder and staggered right in front of Tgurneu, Cargikk, and myself."

Instantly, a question jumped into Adlet's mind. The three of them should have been enemies, but from what Dozzu had just said, it seemed that they had been on the same side at the time.

Sensing Adlet's question, Dozzu changed his story. "Before I talk about Hayuha, should I talk a bit about the three Kyoma commanders—and, more specifically, who we were before we met Hayuha?"

"I'm interested."

"... At that time, Tgurneu, Cargikk, and I... We were friends. Back then, we believed we would remain friends for all eternity."

#

About two hundred years after he had been born, Dozzu—no, he hadn't gone by that name yet—underwent an unexpected and mysterious evolution. The Kyoma usually willed his body to evolve. But one day he experienced an evolution that he had not wished for.

From that evolution Dozzu gained emotion.

The cries of Kyoma echoed throughout the Wailing Demon Territory. It was the pain of being unable to kill humans, the frustration of being beaten by the Six Flowers, and the sadness of how cruel it was that the Majin had been sealed away. The territory was quite literally named after the cries of the Kyoma.

It was a sound that Dozzu had heard constantly since he was born. And it was a cry that he too had made.

But on the day of his evolution, when he heard the sound that he had long grown accustomed to, Dozzu felt an unknown pain in his chest. It took him days, months, and eventually years to identify that pain.

It was sadness. But it was not the sadness of being unable to kill humans. Nor was it the sadness of the Majin's defeat. Dozzu felt sorrow for all the other Kyoma who were sad.

Kyoma never felt sad about the death of another Kyoma. Kyoma never sympathized with the suffering of other Kyoma. Their only thought was to follow the commands of The Majin. A sense of companionship and camaraderie was something only humans had.

However Dozzu lamented the suffering of the other Kyoma, and he wished for their happiness. For the Kyoma that had from the beginning been born to kill humans, happiness would be an impossible development.

Then Dozzu started to suffer a terrible loneliness. There were no Kyoma that could understand the pain in his chest. He was criticized as being a fool and ostracized as some kind of abnormality. Torn away from the group of Kyoma he had lived alongside, Dozzu wandered the Wailing Demon Territory.

Alone for the first time, Dozzu made a roost atop a giant boulder in a corner of the Valley of Spilled Blood. He glared at the continent where the humans lived as he heard the echoes of Kyoma crying behind him.

For a long time Dozzu wished that someday the Kyoma would be able to live without crying, regardless of when that day happened to be. He wished for the day when the land the Kyoma lived in would no longer be called The Wailing Demon Territory.

In his mind he pledged that he would defeat the Heroes of the Six Flowers, revive the Majin, and build a world where Kyoma could live, laugh, and smile. For a long time after that, he pondered exactly how he could make that pledge a reality.

Then, one day, a single Kyoma unexpectedly stood at Dozzu's side. He had a silver mane, walked upright on two feet, and his entire body was clad in silver armor. Dozzu had seen the Kyoma many times in the past. He was a strange Kyoma who, despite having unparalleled strength, did not belong to any group or pack.

Just like Dozzu, that Kyoma was also standing atop the rock, staring at the human world. Dozzu didn't know just how much time passed, but eventually the silver-maned Kyoma began to speak softly.

"You too?"

Dozzu raised his head and looked directly at the Kyoma's face.

"It happened to me too," the silver-maned Kyoma continued. Then he showed Dozzu a fig fruit in his hand. Looking closely, Dozzu could see a tiny mouth in the center of the fruit. It was also a Kyoma.

"Me too," the fig fruit spoke.

Dozzu nodded and replied to the two Kyoma. "Yes, myself as well."

Those were all the words they needed. The three of them all understood what they meant and instantly became friends. They all held the same wish within their chests, and they all understood the same pain.

The lion Kyoma that trained himself day by day to protect the Kyoma from humans.

The fig Kyoma that would offer his flesh in order to give power to frail Kyoma.

The dog Kyoma who continued to search for a way for Kyoma to attain happiness.

They became friends, and together they named one another. The lion Kyoma was given the name Cargikk. The fig Kyoma was called Tgurneu. And the dog Kyoma was named Dozzu.

They were the only Kyoma in the whole world who had hearts capable of love.

#

Then, three hundred years ago, the second battle with the Heroes of the Six Flowers took place.

The results were tragic. The Majin was once again sealed away, and many strong Kyoma lost their lives.

But the reason for their defeat was clear. The Kyoma did not have leaders to command them. The Kyoma had separated into packs of several dozen, and each pack haphazardly attacked the Flowers on their own and lost.

To place other Kyoma under one's control and have them follow orders required overwhelming power and a strong will. In the end, there were no Kyoma that possessed the strength to follow in Dark King Zophrair's footsteps.

During that time it could be said that, with Cargikk as their leader, Dozzu's pack fought valiantly. Dozzu formulated strategies and served as a scout. Cargikk contended with the Six Flowers head on. And Tgurneu gave strength to the Kyoma that followed them and assisted Dozzu and Cargikk.

The pack set foot in the continent of the humans, set a trap for the Flowers in a village, and lured them into it. Then they assassinated Roey, the Saint of Wind, who had grown careless since she was still far away from the Wailing Demon Territory.

They ambushed the master swordsman Badoll in the Forest of Severed Fingers. They launched a two-pronged attack from underground and from atop the trees and grievously injured the swordsman.

The three Kyoma were able to see through the diversion Hayuha and the Saint of Blades Marie had planned. They then managed to temporarily hold their defenses against them in the Land of Fallen Tears.

However, their strenuous effort was in vain. The three Kyoma were exhausted from their repeated battles and couldn't defend against Hayuha and Marie's second attack. In the Land of Fallen Tears, the Majin was defeated.

#

"Meow. What's with all this long-winded drivel?" Hans said with a shrug as he uninterestedly cut Dozzu off. "I'm sorry, meow, but we don't have time to listen to a boring story."

"Pardon me. I will move to the main topic soon. I ask you to please wait a bit longer."

Not minding Hans' ridicule, Dozzu continued his story.

For Adlet it was actually a deeply interesting story. The birth of the Kyoma and the process of their evolution, even to Adlet's teacher Atro, were mysteries. If time allowed, Adlet wanted to hear from Dozzu in detail. It was interesting to hear what the Kyoma were talking about during the second battle with the Six Flowers. Adlet was also interested in the fact that before Tgurneu, Cargikk, and Dozzu were enemies they were actually friends.

However, at the moment, Hayuha's story took precedence.

#

For a month after the Majin fell, Dozzu, Tgurneu, and Cargikk wept constantly. Dozzu didn't know of a way to adequately explain just how deeply painful the defeat of the Majin was for the Kyoma. As an example, it would probably be similar to the suffering one felt when faced with inescapable death. Or perhaps it was like the sadness of losing one's greatest love. Or perhaps it was like the despair one felt right before the destruction of the world.

Dozzu felt that none of these analogies could even compare to the pain the Kyoma felt. There was no way that humans could understand just how important the Majin's existence was for the Kyoma.

Then, the three Kyoma's bodies twisted in even deeper sadness. The Kyoma whom they loved were also sad, and yet the three of them couldn't do anything for them. That painful reality depressed them.

The three of them blamed themselves. They criticized one another, hurt their bodies, and at times thought of suicide.

Eventually, Dozzu couldn't tolerate hearing the cries of his fellow Kyoma anymore. So he left Cargikk and Tgurneu and ran. He went up a mountain, ran through a forest, and crossed a valley. However, no matter where he went, the cries continued to reach his ears.

Dozzu then bashed his head against a giant rock. With blood spilling down his face he repeatedly bashed his head again and again. But that wasn't enough to satisfy him, so then he scorched his body with lightning. For one whole day Dozzu harmed himself over and over again until he ran out of energy and collapsed.

As he lay on the ground, Dozzu wondered why he and the Kyoma had to continue to cry. *Why did they have to suffer? Why did they have to fight?* Without an answer coming to mind, Dozzu's consciousness slowly faded away.

After some time Dozzu awoke and saw that his body had been cast in shadow. Someone was looking down at him. Thinking it to be Cargikk, Dozzu looked up and instantly was at a loss for words.

"Hey, what an adorable Kyoma," a smiling girl said. "Whether it's humans or Kyoma, you have no interest in a world where anyone has to cry, right?"

And that was when Dozzu first met Hayuha.

#

"Meow, was Hayuha cute?" Once again Hans cut into the conversation.

"Can't you just be quiet and listen to the story?" Mora asked.

"Umeow. I've been making people angry since I was a kid."

Scolded by Mora, Hans hunched up and took out a rag from his bags. He began to cut the cloth in the shape of clothes with his sword. It looked like he was going to stitch up his ripped clothing while listening to the story.

He just can't sit still, Adlet thought with a sigh.

"... If you judge her by a human scale, Hayuha probably wasn't that beautiful. She was plain-looking. But what was more important was that everything else about her was far from ordinary."

Dozzu continued his story.

#

For a while Hayuha stared at Dozzu with a large grin on her face. That was when Dozzu recalled that she was one of the enemies he had fought a month ago. However, he had no idea what he should do. *Why is she here? What did she mean earlier? Why is she smiling?* Dozzu couldn't understand any of it.

Before long Cargikk ran over, holding Tgurneu in his hand. As soon as Tgurneu saw Hayuha he screamed. Even Cargikk was stunned for a while, but eventually a poisonous smoke billowed up from his entire body and he took his battle position.

Hayuha, however, wasn't perturbed by their presence at all. She spread her arms out wide with a smile on her face and walked up to meet them halfway.

"Hey, Lion-kun, Fig-kun! You've come at the right time. I'm Hayuha. Since I'm going to be your companion from now on, I hope you'll treat me well."

"... What?"

"Hmm, I was a bit too forward. Um, where should I start?" Hayuha touched her fingers to her forehead in thought. "Right, right. I'd like to cooperate with all of you. Will you hear me out?"

The next instant, Cargikk's giant sword hummed through the air as he swung the steel down towards Hayuha's face with all his strength. But then his blade stopped, although Hayuha hadn't done anything to block the attack. On the contrary, she didn't even move to evade it. She just calmly stared at the sword frozen in place above her head.

"Hey, hey, Lion-kun. Is something wrong?"

She should have been killed, not making light of the situation. But from Hayuha's expression it didn't seem like she was taking the situation lightly at all. Instead she had just calmly accepted the death plunging down towards her.

"Why didn't you dodge, Hero of the Six Flowers?"

"Hmm, no one would care if I died."

Cargikk once again readied his sword. Dozzu also got ready to emit a lightning strike. But although she was wide open to attack, they couldn't bring themselves to fight.

"So, a chat it is. Why don't we sit?"

Hayuha pulled down a liquor jug slung across her back and sat on the ground. Her attitude clearly conveyed that she didn't care about dying.

Since the Kyoma knew they could kill her at any time, they decided to hear her out. If she made the slightest move to defend herself then they would attack at once.

"So, as I said earlier, I would like you all to cooperate with me. Perhaps you three are the only ones I can ask."

The three Kyoma didn't say anything to acknowledge that they had heard her¹. They would listen to her story, but they weren't interested in cooperating in the slightest. The only thing occupying their hearts was their anger towards Hayuha for killing the Majin and making the Kyoma cry.

"I'm thinking about searching for the truth behind the Majin."

The three Kyoma grew tense.

"In short, what kind of existence does the Majin have? Why and in what way was it born? That is what I want to know. And for that reason I need your help."

¹ In the Japanese language it is customary to make confirmation sounds periodically when listening to show the speaker that you understand the material and are following the conversation. If the listener is completely silent it means they are either not paying attention or don't understand.

The three Kyoma didn't say a word.

Why had the Majin been born? Not only had the three Kyoma never thought of that question, but neither had any other Kyoma. The Majin was just the Majin; they didn't have any questions about its existence.

"Perhaps you all want to know the truth as well, don't you? I don't have any proof, it's just a hunch."

The three Kyoma could not answer. Instead, Cargikk asked back, "... How do you plan to find out the truth about the Majin? Aren't you satisfied with just sealing it away? Do you want to kill it too?!"

"Kill the Majin? What for?"

Hayuha leaned her head to the side with a puzzled look, while Dozzu and the others were taken aback by her response.

"Wouldn't it be.... to protect mankind?"

"Ah, I see. To protect mankind, huh? I've never thought of that."

For a moment Dozzu was dumbfounded. *Isn't she one of the Heroes of the Six Flowers who fought to protect mankind just a month ago?*

"Well, I don't intend to kill it. I think it would be more fun if the Majin lived."

"... Fun?"

"If the Majin lives, I'll be able to play with the Majin, right? If it dies then I won't be able to play anymore. And that would be boring."

Dozzu and the others could do nothing but stand there in shock.

"Whether it's fun or not is everything for me. Everything else is just a boring illusion. I can't understand my companions who fuss over inconsequential things like love or justice. Don't you feel the same way, Kyoma gentlemen?"

Hayuha removed the bowl from her head, tilted her wine jug and began to pour. She took a huge gulp and smacked her lips as if it were delicious Then extended the cup towards Cargikk.

"By the way, want to have a drink? Drinking with the Kyoma also seems like fun."

Cargikk stared at the bowl of alcohol for a moment before eventually accepting. With alcohol spilling from his lips, Cargikk drank the contents in one go.

"Ah, what a waste. Don't spill. It's quality goods."

"I feel like vomiting," Cargikk said, thrusting the bowl back at Hayuha.

With a sad look on her face, Hayuha licked up the remaining alcohol in the bowl.

"We live in order to protect the Majin. We live in order to grant the requests of the Majin. If something could put the Majin in danger, then we would stop it."

"Hmm, I guess it's no use after all."

"However... working with you may lead us to knowing the truth about the Majin... or perhaps being victorious in the next fight."

Shocked, Dozzu turned to look at Cargikk.

"By cooperating with you, we might discover a technique to increase the Kyoma's strength, a way for the Kyoma to increase their numbers beyond what they are now, or maybe even a method to undo the seal on the Majin."

"Cargikk. What are you thinking?!"

"Dozzu. The third battle has already begun. And I will do whatever it takes to destroy the next Six Flowers."

"But she's a human. What's more, she's one of the Six Flowers. To cooperate with her..."

"Are you insane, Cargikk?!" Tgurneu asked, just as shocked as Dozzu was.

"If I am, then it would be best for you two to go somewhere else and ignore me. You can't stop me."

"But..."

As the three Kyoma argued, Hayuha casually interjected, "I don't think it's good to fight."

Whose fault is that? Dozzu thought.

"Hayuha. We will use you, and together we will annihilate mankind. If that doesn't bother you then we shall cooperate."

"Of course, your cooperation is most welcome. Lion-kun, is it alright if I call you Cargikk?"

Hayuha smiled as she slurped her alcohol.

"Ah, right. So before we proceed, answer this first. What will you do if you know the truth about the Majin?" Cargikk asked.

"Tell us," Dozzu added.

"If I know the truth about the Majin... No, if the Majin is just as I predicted..."

Hayuha downed her alcohol in one final gulp.

"I'm thinking of becoming friends with the Majin. I think I want to try drinking with the Majin."

"Did you say friends?"

"Doesn't that sound fun? It would probably be the most enjoyable drinking party in the entire history of the world. But it'll be lonely if it's just me and the Majin. It doesn't matter whether they're human or Kyoma, it'll be a banquet where everyone on this earth can gather. That way sounds the most enjoyable."

Hayuha smiled.

"And even if afterwards mankind was annihilated, I'd be okay with that."

Cargikk's shoulders shuddered slightly. But, though at first it seemed like he was angry, the next instant he erupted in a wild laughter.

"... Hayuha. Is it really alright with you if mankind is wiped out?"

To Cargikk's question, Hayuha happily answered, "I've already saved the world once. It might be interesting to try to destroy it next."

Dozzu couldn't understand any of what Hayuha was thinking, but he understood that he probably already had no choice but to cooperate with her. Cargikk was their leader. Wherever he went, they had to follow.

#

As he listened to the story, Adlet felt that Hayuha couldn't have been serious. He knew from the legends that she was a strange person, but he'd never thought she had been that extreme.

"Hayuha no longer identified with humans. She was even indifferent to things like responsibility, duty, and justice. All that mattered to her was whether she could have fun or not. She considered the fate of mankind and even her own life to be inconsequential. For her, fighting against the Majin as one of the Six Flowers was probably nothing more than a form of entertainment."

"..."

"After defeating the Majin she grew bored. So she came up with another idea to entertain herself and tried it. Perhaps that was the only reason Hayuha went to the Wailing Demon Territory. She wanted to have a giant feast with humans, the Majin, and the Kyoma. She had truly come up with an outrageous form of entertainment."

The Heroes were speechless.

"So, the three of us became companions with Hayuha. For five years after that we worked together."

With that Dozzu finished the first part of his story and fell silent.

Chapter One: Part Two

Before hearing the rest of Dozzu's story, the companions decided to search the surrounding area. There was a possibility that they would be ambushed if Tgurneu discovered their location. However, there were no signs of Kyoma in the area.

Adlet and the others went back to Dozzu and sat around the small Kyoma.

"How did you go about investigating the Majin?" Mora asked.

That had also been Adlet's question. For a thousand years humans had tried to uncover the truth about the Majin, but it didn't seem like something they could accomplish easily even if they cooperated with the Kyoma. And as far as they could tell from Dozzu's story, not even the Kyoma had a shred of information about the Majin.

"It was possible for Hayuha. She was the only person in all of history who could."

"How did she do it?"

"She could manipulate the flow of time and allow herself to see the events of the past with her very own eyes."

The information seemed to shock Mora, and both Chamo and Rolonia seemed to be feeling the same way.

"She was that incredible?" Hans asked. "Well, if she is the Saint of Time then it seems like something she could do."

Hans had taken out a needle and thread and was now skillfully stitching the cloth he'd cut out into clothing.

"Among the vast number of Saints' abilities, the power of time is known as the most difficult to wield. Previous Saints of Time were pretty much unable to use it for anything other than slowing down the decay of things.

"At the time it was recognized as phenomenal for Hayuha to use the power of time in battle. But for her to be able to see the past..."

"That's even more phenomenal. Even Chamo is a bit surprised," Chamo said.

"If you're saying that, then she must really be incredible, meow."

Dozzu continued his story.

"However, she couldn't see the past freely. She first had to go to the place where an event occurred and increase the power of time in the area by reciting an incantation."

"We gathered information from Kyoma that had lived for a long time and showed Hayuha places where it seemed there might be clues. Next we took steps to ensure that other Kyoma wouldn't come. Then Hayuha used her technique and learned about what had happened there in the past."

"Repeating those measures, the four of us searched for the truth about the Majin. We scoured the Wailing Demon Territory for clues about the past. Sometimes we borrowed the powers of metamorphosis Kyoma and changed form, then headed off to the world of humans right beside Hayuha. And after all of that, we finally reached the truth."

"And that is?"

Dozzu looked like he was about to answer Adlet's question, but right before he could, a small blade jutted out of the ground right in front of his eyes.

Everyone turned to look at Nashetania. While still held in Goldof's arms, Nashetania looked at Dozzu and shook her head slightly from side to side.

"You're right, Nashetania," Dozzu said, then looked back at the Heroes.

"I apologize, but at the moment I cannot tell you the truth about the Majin. But if the time comes when I need to, then I'll explain everything."

"You haven't told us everything?"

"I promised that I would give you clues to find the Seventh. I didn't say that I would tell you everything."

Adlet and Dozzu glared at one another.

"You're going to lead us up to a good point, then leave us hanging until next time? That's a technique minstrels at taverns sometimes use, meow."

Dozzu wasn't swayed by Hans's sarcasm.

"Why won't you tell us?"

"In order to be victorious against all of you, I can't reveal all of my cards."

"...I see."

Nashetania and Dozzu had said that they were plotting to replace the Majin. But Adlet was still unclear about how they intended to accomplish that.

Probably if the truth about the Majin became clear, then the method they planned to use to replace him would also come into focus.

"If the time to talk comes?" Does that mean they don't intend to talk until the very end? Adlet wondered.

"But Chamo has gotten interested in the truth about the Majin. If you don't tell Chamo, Chamo will beat you to a pulp."

With a vein bulging on her forehead, she twirled her green foxtail grass. Just a little earlier she'd almost been killed. So though she was calmly listening to them at the moment, she was still in a fairly bad mood.

"I think you might want to stop yourself before it's too late. If you kill me then you won't be able to hear what I have to say."

"That's right. So in that case, torture."

With a happy look on her face Chamo started to push the foxtail grass down her throat. But immediately after she started moving, Rolonia rushed up and grabbed her from behind.

"Wait, Chamo-san!"

"Let go of me, you dumb cow!"

Rolonia and Chamo started to wrestle with one another and Adlet and Mora sighed. Adlet looked over to Nashetania and saw her giggling.

"Unfortunately it seems like it will be impossible to make them talk," Mora said.

"I apologize, but I have my reasons. If we were to tell you everything then we would be of no further use to you. If that were to happen, you would no longer have a reason to keep us alive. In order to survive, I can't tell you everything."

At the moment, the most important pieces of information were the clues that Dozzu had regarding the true identity of the seventh. They could not break off their partnership yet; for now, it seemed better to give up on trying to hear more about the Majin.

"Torture is too much trouble. Chamo will beat you to death now."

"Chamo-san, please calm down!"

As Chamo tried to tear Rolonia off of her, Mora approached and hit Chamo in the head with her fist. Chamo reluctantly yielded.

"So, Hayuha's story and the clue that pertains to the seventh. Are those two linked somehow?" Fremy asked.

"Yes, I can tell you that. After we and Hayuha finally discovered the truth about the Majin, we decided to go deeper with our investigation and search for the truth about the Saint of the Single Flower."

"And what did you find out?"

"I can't answer that," Dozzu said bluntly. "But, we didn't search for long. After investigating the Saint of the Single Flower for about a month, Hayuha suddenly died. And our ability to investigate the past died with her."

"Why did Hayuha die?"

"Perhaps we should consider the possibility that she was killed by someone."

That's a strange way to put it, Adlet thought. If she had been killed then why didn't Dozzu just say so?

"What do you mean?"

"Murder was the only possible reason for her death, but at that time it was impossible for anyone to kill Hayuha. Not even Cargikk, Tgurneu, or I could do it. Of course, other Kyoma and normal humans couldn't kill her either."

"Umeomeow. You mean to say you didn't kill her?" Hans asked with a smile. Before any of them had noticed, he had finished sewing a new tunic.

"You're wrong. But in any case, it is impossible for me to explain right now."

Hayuha's cause of death was not important. So Dozzu continued his story.

"After that, a rift opened between us. After learning the truth about the Majin, I lost my loyalty towards it. I started to dream of a world that was ruled by a new Majin, a world where humans and Kyoma could live together in peace. Cargikk fiercely opposed that idea, and me."

"Even though Cargikk learned the truth about the Majin, his loyalty did not waver. Tgurneu worked hard to mend the relationship between us, but after a hundred years, our alliance dissolved and I left the Wailing Demon Territory with my small amount of troops."

"Your friendship was a very flimsy thing," Fremy said.

Dozzu tensed and his fur stood up at Fremy's words. Glaring at Fremy, it looked like he was about to say something. But then he looked away and restrained his anger.

"But Cargikk and I had been deceived by Tgurneu. Unbeknownst to us, Tgurneu had secretly conducted an investigation of the Saint of the Single Flower."

"Tgurneu?"

"Hayuha had left behind a Saint Instrument which could be used to learn about the past. We thought that instrument had been lost when Hayuha died. However, Tgurneu had secretly acquired it and used it to search for the Saint of the Single Flower. Perhaps he'd begun his search before Hayuha had even died. I'm ashamed to say I didn't realize this until over two hundred years after her death."

Adlet pondered Dozzu's words before he spoke. "In other words, Tgurneu knows some kind of secret about the Saint of the Single Flower. And in order to hide that from all of you, he killed Hayuha to silence her. Is that what you're saying?"

".... I can't say anything definitively."

"Judging from what you've described, it doesn't seem like it could be anything else," Adlet said.

Looking at the ground, Dozzu thought for a while. "No, it was impossible for Tgurneu to kill Hayuha at that time..."

He seemed to be puzzling over something. But as if there wasn't any point in thinking about it any further, he returned to his story.

"I shall place Hayuha's story on hold. It's about time I got back to the main topic. So, allow me to talk about the clue I have regarding the seventh's identity."

Finally, Adlet thought.

"As I just said, Tgurneu had secretly searched for information about the Saint of the Single Flower. Besides that, he also investigated the powers of the Saints. Tgurneu and his followers abducted humans from various places and brought them to the Wailing Demon Territory. He kidnapped female acolytes living at the Head Temple and from each of the other temples, and he also took theologians who studied the powers of the Saints. Sometimes he even abducted Saints as well."

Adlet had already known all of that. Tgurneu had produced Fremy, the Saint of Gunpowder; it was apparent that he possessed a wealth of knowledge about the Saints and their powers.

"Naturally, his objective was to eliminate the Heroes of the Six Flowers. And so he created his ultimate weapon."

"I'd heard that I had been created to gather information about the Saints," Fremy said.

Dozzu shook his head. "That's not right. Perhaps you were nothing more than a by-product of Tgurneu's research. Or you might be a cover-up to divert people's attention from his true objective."

A confused and pained look crossed Fremy's face.

"I've also wondered whether or not you were Tgurneu's secret weapon. However, although you possess a high degree of fighting prowess, you are nothing more than a single Saint. And if you were Tgurneu's ultimate weapon then he would never have let you go, to say nothing of the fact that he made you fight Chamo-san."

"... That's right," Fremy said as she looked away.

"My brethren infiltrated Tgurneu's ranks and searched for information about his weapon. Sometimes they would make contact with one of the Kyoma in Tgurneu's inner circle and follow them, overhearing their conversations and gathering information. However, since Tgurneu was thoroughly secretive, the most they could learn were fragments of information."

"Cargikk has also tried searching for answers, but it seems like he wasn't able to find anything either."

"What kind of information did you manage to get?"

"One was that Tgurneu's trump card was a Saint Instrument. It was not a human Saint or a Kyoma that had gained the power of the gods—it was purely a tool. The Kyoma of Tgurneu's inner circle were clear about that."

"Saint Instrument" was a general term used to describe tools which the Saints had imbued with the power of the gods. Even the crests that Adlet and the others possessed were a kind of Saint Instrument.

"And the second was the name of that Saint Instrument. It was identified in one of Tgurneu's written instructions we'd intercepted. Tgurneu called it the Black Barren Flower."

A barren flower¹ was a flower which spread without bearing any fruit. Adlet tried muttering the phrase softly in his mouth, but it gave him an awful sense of dread.

"The third is a supposition based on that information. Perhaps the Black Barren Flower contains the same kind of power: the power of the Goddess of Fate, which the Saint of the Single Flower possessed. Tgurneu concealed the fact that he'd been looking into the Saint of the Single Flower for hundreds of years, so it seems like a natural conclusion."

"And the fourth.... Adlet-san, could you take out a map?"

¹ Although there are phrases in English to describe this type of plant, "Barren Flower" and "Abortive Flower", the phrases are not as common in English as they are in Japanese. It is also worth noting that the Japanese idiom has the secondary meaning of meaningless, or fruitless (such as a fruitless effort).

Adlet pulled out a map from his iron box and spread it out in front of Dozzu. The information left over by the Saint of the Single Flower and past Heroes of the Six Flowers was written on it, as well as memos about each of the places Adlet and the others had visited.

"Here."

Dozzu set his forelegs on the map. At the north part of the center of the Wailing Demon Territory, there was a place called the Fainting Mountain. Dozzu's forelegs were pointing to a place a bit north of that center point.

"Tgurneu built a temple worshipping the Goddess of Fate here."

Other than Goldof, everyone looked at the point on the map Dozzu had indicated. Many temples dedicated to the Goddess of Fate had been built all over the world. Even the temple Adlet had infiltrated when he barged into the tournament before the Goddess had called itself a Temple of Fate.

"The Temple of Fate cannot be built by anyone other than the Saint of the Single Flower. Even if someone else tried to construct one, it wouldn't house the goddess..." Mora said.

"But it was built, and Tgurneu created the Barren Flower there. This is genuine information which my brethren paid with their lives to get."

"The Barren Flower...is that the fake crest that the seventh possesses?" Adlet asked.

"That is extremely possible. Even if that isn't the case, I think it would be worth it to go to this place since other than the Seventh Tgurneu possesses the so-called Black Barren Flower."

"And there is one more piece of evidence: it seems that Tgurneu has deployed Kyoma around the area—and on top of that, they appear to be elite specialist Kyoma. And even though all of you came to the Wailing Demon Territory, he still hasn't moved all of his elites."

Dozzu lifted his forelegs off the map, yet Adlet continued to stare at the point that he'd been indicating.

"That's all the clues we have concerning the seventh. Whether or not you trust my information and however you decide to proceed is up to you," Dozzu concluded, and went back over to Nashetania, who was still cradled in Goldof's arms.

With a smile, Nashetania lifted her hand and gently pet Dozzu on the cheek.

"What should we do, Adlet?" Mora asked.

Adlet continued to stare at the map. The Temple of Fate that Dozzu had talked about wasn't far from their current location.

If they didn't encounter anything on the way then they would probably reach the location in about a day. Though it was in a slightly different direction than The Land of Fallen Tears, it wouldn't waste that much time.

The problem was whether or not there was truly any value in heading to that location. And Adlet couldn't say for sure that it wasn't a trap.

"I want more information," Adlet said, looking back at Dozzu. "You said your subordinates infiltrated Tgurneu's troops. Didn't they come across any other information?"

"Frankly, it wasn't any information of importance," Dozzu said. But after thinking for a moment, he added: "Well, for starters, almost none of Tgurneu's Kyoma know the identity of the seventh."

Adlet was shocked. *Was that not important information?*

"Just like Fremy-san, even my brethren who had sneaked in among Tgurneu's forces had no idea about a plan to dispatch a fake Flower. Most of Tgurneu's Kyoma are probably the same. The Kyoma only began to learn about the seventh after all of you came to the Wailing Demon Territory. Or, to be more specific, ten days after the Majin awoke."

Adlet thought back to the 10th day, right before the fight in the Illusion Fog Barrier.

"On the 10th day, Tgurneu sent a messenger across the entire Wailing Demon Territory to tell everyone about the seventh. The messenger said that an imposter had infiltrated the group of assembled Heroes, and that they would bring about their victory."

"..."

"It was not important to know who the seventh was. The messenger said to think of all the Heroes as enemies and be prepared to kill them all. Even if one of the Flowers said they were the seventh and started to approach, Tgurneu said to kill them without hesitation."

"My brethren among Tgurneu's forces went to Tgurneu to confirm that information. It seemed that other Kyoma in Tgurneu's forces had already asked him the same thing. However, Tgurneu simply laughed and answered that the plan was already in motion. The seventh would not die."

"I wonder what the plan is," Fremy said.

"... I have no idea," Dozzu replied with a shake of his head.

Adlet had observed the movements of the Kyoma in all the fights they'd had so far. He'd been checking whether they were holding back or doing anything unusual, trying to guess the seventh's identity from the way the Kyoma were fighting. And now he finally understood the reason why he wasn't able to discern anything unusual about their movements.

"Tgurneu was thorough," Fremy said. "He made it so we wouldn't get an inkling of the seventh's true identity no matter what."

"But what is his plan? How is he protecting the seventh from the Kyoma?" Rolonia asked, tilting her head to the side.

"I don't know. Could it be by smell? Maybe the seventh is emitting a scent that makes the Kyoma unable to attack..."

"If that were the case then I would know it," Fremy replied. "And the Kyoma would definitely behave unnaturally."

"Ah, that's right..." Hans said, turning to Dozzu and ignoring everyone else. "Are your comrades still among Tgurneu's forces?"

Dozzu shook his head. "No, they've all been killed. My brethren had no choice but to leave their superiors in order to protect Nashetania as she fled.."

"Until when were your comrades within Tgurneu's ranks?" Hans asked.

"Until the night of the twelfth."

Hans paused, seemingly thinking about something, before continuing. "By the way, what were you doing while we were fighting with Princess-san?"

"I was in the Wailing Demon Territory, working alongside my brethren to make sure that Tgurneu and Cargikk didn't interfere with our plans. Is something wrong?"

"Umeow, it's not important," Hans replied, and ended his questioning. It seemed like he had thought of something, but Adlet didn't know what it was.

Then, after being quiet for the entire discussion, Goldof suddenly spoke. "Did nothing... happen... while the Princess was captured?"

Adlet was surprised; he'd thought Goldof had no intention of joining their conversation. But now it seemed that, rather than deciding not to participate, he simply hadn't spoken yet.

"Huh? Um, right," Dozzu replied. Goldof's sudden input took even Dozzu and Nashetania slightly by surprise. "... Only one thing happened. After Nashetania was swallowed by the Dark Specialist Number 26, I tried to trick Tgurneu into revealing if he'd moved the seventh and whether he intended on killing the Flowers."

"So?"

"Tgurneu replied in a tone that seemed to suggest I was a fool. He said, 'What are you saying? The attack is already in motion'."

"..."

"I had thought that one or two of you had been killed by the seventh, so I was genuinely shocked when I found out that everyone had assembled safely."

Adlet placed his hand on his chin. *The attack is already in motion.* It was a statement he couldn't overlook. Sure, it was possible that Tgurneu had simply lied. However, if it were true, then it meant that at the moment Adlet and the others were in serious danger. If they weren't able to figure out what the enemy's attack would be, they would have no chance of winning.

"Those are about all the clues that I can present you with."

So that's the end of the discussion, Adlet thought, just before Fremy asked another question.

"... There is one important thing that we're not talking about: Nashetania possesses one of the fake crests. How did you acquire it?"

Of course that was something they needed to ask about. But with the information about Hayuha and the Barren Flower, there'd been so many things on Adlet's mind that he'd completely forgotten.

The explanation could shed some light on how Tgurneu got his hands on the other fake crest.

"Yes, I can talk about that. It's not very complicated. As you know, the items Hayuha touched have the ability to manipulate time. She used that very power on the crest of the Six Flowers. In the past, after the Majin was defeated the Flowers' crests would naturally disappear after about six months. However, Hayuha made it so that her crest was semi-permanent. Immediately after Hayuha was chosen as one of the Six Flowers, she used that ability so that her crest would not fade or lose any petals."

So it was her power that allowed Hayuha to stay in the Wailing Demon Territory for five years, Adlet realized.

"Once, slightly before she died, Hayuha left the Wailing Demon Territory. The two of us had been traveling together, and when she left she transferred her crest to me. I kept it a secret from both Tgurneu and Cargikk, and eventually I handed it over to Nashetania. That's everything."

"What? The crests can be given away?" Chamo asked in surprise.

"Why don't you know that? They can be handed over if the owner of the crest approves of someone and believes should have it. But it's never happened in practice."

Even Adlet had known that on the way to the Wailing Demon Territory, the Master Archer Byrne, who was one of the original Six Flowers, argued with the leader of a group of a savage tribe over the crest. At the time Perule the Saint of Fire was present and said the same thing.

"However, is it possible to hand the crest over to a Kyoma?" Mora asked Dozzu.

"It was possible. There wasn't any problem at all. It's just that no one had ever thought to give the crest to a Kyoma. And..."

"Actually, there is a Kyoma right here who has a crest," Fremy said.

"Umeow. Why did Hayuha choose to give the crest to you, meow?"

For a while it seemed like Dozzu was searching for the words to respond to Hans's question.

"It's my dream to replace the Majin. In order to make that dream a reality, I needed a crest of the Six Flowers, no matter what the cost. I never knew what Hayuha was thinking, but she too sought a world where humans and Kyoma could coexist. Or maybe she just did it all on a whim."

"Why do you need it, meow?"

Dozzu responded with silence, and Hans shrugged. "So that's something you can't say, meow?"

Dozzu nodded. Adlet wondered how in the world he planned on replacing the Majin and creating such a world for humans and Kyoma.

And why did he need a crest of the Six Flowers to do so? His questions were only growing deeper, but Adlet decided that it would probably be impossible to hear anything more from Dozzu at the moment.

"Was Tgurneu's fake crest created in the same way?" Fremy asked.

"I think that is highly unlikely. It has been verified that the crests of the other surviving Heroes, Mellania and Marie, disappeared without any event."

"And what about the other three?"

"Roey, the Saint of Wind, was killed by Cargikk before she managed to reach the Wailing Demon Territory. I've heard the Master Swordsman Badoll was decapitated by a Kyoma with a single blow. The Saint of Salt Manyakam set a trap to protect her companions. She lured a bunch of Kyoma to her location, and it's said she blew herself up. I find it hard to think that any of them had any time to hand over their crests."

"... What about the first Six Flowers?"

"Are you asking if there was another Saint of Time that could do the same thing that Hayuha did?" Dozzu asked.

Fremy shook her head.

"Well then how did Tgurneu create his fake crest?" Chamo asked.

"Unfortunately I do not know."

"You're not very useful. Can Chamo kill you now?"

Rolonia again tried to jump in the way. However, this time it seemed like Chamo wasn't serious.

"Should we consider the possibility that the fake crest was created at a Temple of Fate? Mora, what do you think?" Adlet looked over to Mora. Out of everyone in the group, she was the most informed when it came to the powers of the Saints.

"Honestly speaking, I have no clue. The Saint of the Single Flower... There are a lot of things even we at the Head Temple don't know about the Saint of Fate. There is no proof that the laws that apply to the other Saints also hold true for the Saint of Fate."

She is absolutely right. The Saint of the Single Flower was just as much of a mystery as the Majin.

The Saint of the Single Flower suddenly appeared when the Majin was about to bring the world to ruin. Before her there hadn't been any Saints. They were all born after the Saint of the Single Flower defeated the Majin and taught people how to become Saints.

How did she become a Saint? And how did she know how to become a Saint? And where was the Temple of Fate where she became a Saint? History had no records of any of that.

Even now, no one knew when she had died. She built many Temples of Fate so that the Heroes of the Six Flowers could be chosen. She herself chose various women to become Saints, and she left the people with many legends pertaining to the Six Flowers. But after explaining everything that needed to be done to ensure the birth of the Six Flowers, she quietly disappeared. Neither her corpse nor her grave could be found anywhere in the world.

And on top of all of that, no one even knew her name.

The Saint of the Single Flower was the same as the Majin; they both appeared suddenly in the world. And as soon as she saved the world she disappeared in a flash. It was unclear whether or not she was even truly human.

"If you try to think about it, this is all very strange, meow. We don't even know the truth about the Saint of the Single Flower. And yet we're obediently following her words and fighting like this."

"... That's right."

"It's not my policy to agree to kill without even hearing the name of my client, meow."

Adlet didn't know whether he was joking or making a serious complaint.

Unconsciously, Adlet looked at the crest on his right hand. The crest of the Six Flowers gave the bearer the power to save the world. The immortal and invincible Majin could not be harmed by anyone who did not possess the crest. According to legend, the power of Fate imbued within the crests had the ability to negate the immortal Fate of the Majin. Not to mention that without the crest, Adlet wouldn't even be able to breathe in the Wailing Demon Territory.

The Crest of the Six Flowers was essential to saving the world, but at the same time it was possible that they didn't know much about them. Uneasiness whirled within Adlet's chest.

Who in the world was the Saint of the Single Flower?

"Mora, if you were to go to the Temple of Fate, would you be able to find out what happened there?"

"If there is a holy barrier or altar used to create a Saint Instrument left over, then I would be able to tell what had been created there. However, as I said earlier, the Saint of Fate is full of mystery. It's hard to say that I'd understand everything."

"What if you tried asking the people at the temple, meow?" Hans suggested.

At that point Dozzu cut into the conversation. "I understand that there used to be a lot of people at the temple. The female acolytes and scholars were well-versed in the powers of the Saints. They should definitely know, don't you think?"

"... It's unthinkable that Tgurneu would let them live," Fremy said.

Dozzu nodded. Tgurneu was thoroughly trying to hide his secret; if there was even a slight chance that the information could be leaked, he would crush it.

"So even if we tried to go, we wouldn't find out anything," Mora said with a pained expression.

Silence fell among the companions, while ideas about what they should do rushed about their heads.

"The first question is whether Dozzu is telling the truth or not," Adlet said.

After a moment Chamo replied, "Chamo is completely against this. Chamo can't trust Dozzu. He's done talking, so it would be best to beat him to death."

"Chamo, I'm honestly really interested in the truth about the Majin. Even if you're going to kill him, I think it's best if you hear that first."

"Well then, let's torture him. Chamo will crush his bones and destroy his insides."

As Chamo twirled her foxtail grass, Fremy shook her head.

"It's a fact that Dozzu and Tgurneu oppose one another, so I don't think his desire for cooperation is a lie. And though it doesn't seem like everything he said up until now was the truth, I don't think it was all a lie either," said Fremy.

"Huh? You believe him, Fremy? You believe this stupid dog?" Chamo knit her eyebrows unhappily.

"I also think he isn't lying," Rolonia said as she looked around at everyone's faces.

"Well, if we knew he were lying we would just kill him, meow. Chamo, I understand how you feel, meow. But how about you wait a bit longer?"

"... If Cat-san says so..." Chamo reluctantly put away her foxtail grass.

"I think it's a trap."

Everyone looked over to Goldof.

"It's possible that the princess and Dozzu conspired with Tgurneu to try to kill all of us. Dozzu and Tgurneu may be enemies, but there is a chance that the two of them made eliminating the Heroes their top priority and joined forces."

"... You shouldn't say shocking things like that, Goldof. Aren't you on their side?" Adlet asked. He'd already figured Goldof was a part of Dozzu's forces.

"I will protect the Princess, but I have no intention of assisting with their ambitions. Since I am one of the Six Flowers, I will protect the Princess, and the Princess will protect the Six Flowers. The world and the princess will show each other they can protect each other."

Looking into his eyes, Adlet could see Goldof's true intentions. Nashetania was looking up at Goldof from his arms, and she, too, couldn't discern any secrets from his face.

"Goldof-san, I thought you would say that. We won't be able to win you over as a friend after all," Dozzu said.

"I see."

"Though if you were just a bit more flexible then our plans could have changed," Dozzu sighed.

"You will protect the princess, regardless of the fact that she is an enemy? What in the hell are you thinking?" Mora grumbled.

Adlet agreed with her sentiment, and the others probably did as well. However, they could not see a single cloud of confusion in his eyes.

"Goldof, as far as we can tell from the battle earlier, Tgurneu completely intended to kill Nashetania. Even now, it seems hard to think that they might be working together," Adlet said.

"I agree that the chance is low. But there is still a chance."

"Of course we can't lower our guard. But I can't ignore the possibility that Dozzu is telling the truth."

"... Understood."

Goldof backed down, and Nashetania let out a sigh of relief.

"Well then, as for the second question. If Dozzu's story is true, then is any of it really beneficial to our cause?"

Adlet pointed to a spot on the map. At the center of the Fainting Mountains, the map showed there was a Temple of Fate.

"Do you think Tgurneu would leave behind evidence or information, meow? If I were him, I'd destroy it in advance."

"That's not necessarily the case. Among the Saint Instruments, if the holy incantation barrier or altar is broken or destroyed, then the effectiveness will dissipate. Many of the powerful Saint Instruments are like that," Mora said.

"The Saints are a difficult bunch, meow. I, meow—I can't understand them." Hans scratched his head.

"Plus, don't you think Tgurneu has deployed Kyoma to protect the place? At the very least, there is something that they don't want us to see."

"Do you think it might just be a trap to lure us in and kill us?" Hans asked. "If all the proof is gone and it's nothing but a trap, then it would all have been a waste of time."

That is certainly possible.

"Ah... Dozzu-san," Rolonia said. "Can you explain about the Temple of Fate in more detail?"

"No, I only know what's in this area."

Rolonia continued to stare at the map.

"I think it'd be difficult to search for that Temple of Fate. But this mountain seems to be fairly low."

The companions fell quiet. *She's forgetting who's right in front of her*, Adlet thought.

"Rolonia. I am the Saint of Mountains."

"Ah! That's right. Excuse me, I'm sorry."

Finally realizing the obvious, Rolonia bowed her head to everyone. Mora could use her second sight ability to look over everything on a mountain she was on. As long as she was there, it probably wouldn't be very difficult to find things.

"For starters... What is this so-called Black Barren Flower? Is it the seventh's fake crest?" Mora asked.

"But the crest isn't black."

"We can't go off the name alone," Fremy declared. "Even if it seems like a fake crest, there is a chance that it could be something else too."

"Well, I'm more scared of the idea that this Barren Flower *isn't* the fake crest. It would mean that Tgurneu has another trump card, meow."

As the conversation carried on, Dozzu and Nashetania stared at Adlet. Although they didn't come out and say it, it seemed like they wanted him to hurry up and come up with a solution.

So the decision is obvious, Adlet thought.

"It's decided. All of us will go to the Fainting Mountain. And at the Temple of Fate we will discover the truth about the Black Barren Flower."

Adlet usually listened to everyone's opinions before coming to a conclusion, but this time he decided that everyone should simply follow his idea.

"... It's dangerous," Goldof said.

"Are you ignoring Chamo's opinion?" Chamo asked.

Rolonia and Mora also looked confused. Nevertheless, Adlet had no intention of changing his mind.

"It's surely dangerous. But as the world's strongest, I think this is a chance we can't overlook."

"Why is that?" Chamo asked.

"Perhaps this whole time we've only fought within the boundaries of Tgurneu's expectations. What happened with Mora and what happened with Goldof— everything we did was just in reaction to Tgurneu's plans."

"But this time, things are different. There's no way Tgurneu could have anticipated that Dozzu would team up with us, and that Dozzu would even know about the Temple of Fate. This opportunity has slipped out from his fingers. And perhaps it's the only chance we'll get."

Chamo fell silent.

"I agree, Adlet," Fremy said. "We absolutely have to discover the truth about the Black Barren Flower."

"Umeow. That's unusual. Generally you believe danger should be avoided, meow."

"Usually that's true. But I think this time we have to take the risk," Fremy replied.

"Why?" Chamo asked.

"Just a hunch."

Chamo looked like she didn't believe what she was hearing.

"All this time, I've felt like an invisible hand had grabbed hold of my throat and was suffocating me. I know that if I don't shake it off, it will definitely kill me. But I don't know what that hand really is. And that's what I'm really afraid of."

"So I believe that if we don't find out about this so-called Black Barren Flower, then it will be the end for all of us. Don't you think that's a reasonable thought?"

If Adlet were being honest with himself, he also had the same kind of feeling. The first time he heard the phrase "Black Barren Flower" a dark chill ran down his spine, and at that instant, he knew that he had to find it no matter what.

"So is it okay if we travel together to the Fainting Mountain and search for the truth about the Black Barren Flower?" Fremy asked.

"Yeah, it's decided," Adlet said. And though the others looked like they had various opinions about the plan, none of them objected.

"Understood. We too will give our all. Together we will search for the truth about the Black Barren Flower and seek out the seventh. You don't mind, right, Nashetania?" Dozzu asked.

Nashetania nodded.

"But let's prepare for betrayal," Fremy said as she approached Goldof and Nashetania. She bent down and started to place her hands atop both of Nashetania's legs.

"What... are you doing?" Goldof asked.

"Let me place an explosive on both of Nashetania's legs. If she betrays us, I'll blow them off."

The air tensed around them. Dozzu's fur stood up and Goldof grabbed his spear.

"... Do you think... I'll allow you to do that?"

"By all rights this is a compromise. Originally I was going to put the bomb around her filthy neck."

Goldof and Fremy glared at one another and sparks started to scatter from Dozzu's body. Chamo grinned and touched the foxtail grass to her mouth.

Adlet stopped the situation before it exploded out of control. "Tgurneu or Cargikk. I promise that we can part ways when we defeat one of them."

"You're soft, Adlet."

Fremy was right. Precautions were necessary. But there was a chance that they would start to kill one another right there if things went too far. He had to maintain the alliance with Dozzu, Goldof, and Nashetania.

"... It can't be helped," Nashetania said in a husky voice as she spat bloody froth from her mouth. She made Goldof lower his spear and stretched both of her legs out before Fremy.

"That's unexpectedly gracious of you."

Fremy placed her hands on both of Nashetania's knees and concentrated her energy. After a while, a clay-like substance appeared within her hands and clung to Nashetania's knees.

"Relax. Sparks or shocks will not trigger the explosion. It will only explode by my command."

"If... you... break your word... I'll kill you," Goldof said. "Even if it's by accident and you haven't betrayed us, if the bomb goes off, I'll kill you. Even if Tgurneu or Cargikk are killed but the bomb is not removed, then I'll still kill you. It doesn't matter if you're a genuine Flower or an impostor."

"Right. Do as you like," Fremy replied coldly.

"The plan's decided. Now, let's figure out exactly what our plan of action is going to be," Adlet said, spreading his map onto the ground. Everyone's eyes focused on the paper.

"There's no sign of the enemy around here. It looks like Tgurneu has pulled back all of his forces and is planning to station them within Cargikk's Canyon. The problem is, where exactly is Tgurneu waiting to ambush us?"

Dozzu pointed to the center of the map with his forelimbs. It was a plain that extended south from the center of the Wailing Demon Territory to the area called the Plain of Severed Ears. There was a forest, a rocky area which could be used for hiding, and the safe zone called the Eternal Flower.

"If Tgurneu thinks we'll go straight towards the Land of Fallen Tears then he'll be here. He'll most likely spread a net of himself and his main force across this area, but if he anticipates that we'll head for the Temple of Fate, then perhaps he'll wait for us here."

Next Dozzu pointed to the Fainting Mountain area north of the center of the Wailing Demon Territory.

"If Tgurneu blocks our path then we'll have no choice but to fight him. Worst case scenario, we'll have to launch an ambush to keep them distracted for a while."

"That'll be a tough fight."

"That time will be the highlight of me, the world's strongest man."

"... Right." Dozzu was puzzled.

I have to make even him understand that I am the world's strongest, Adlet thought.

"If Tgurneu is in the plain then that'll be a bit favorable for us. We can find out the truth about the Black Barren Flower before he brings his main forces to the Temple of Fate. It's a game of time. But there's another place that could become a problem for us."

This time Dozzu indicated a spot east of the Fainting Mountains.

"The Fainting Mountains are precarious, and it will probably take even you some time to cross them. In order to safely and quickly reach the Temple of Fate, you'll have to exit the forest from this east side and advance through the mountain valley. Tgurneu may have laid a trap or stationed a powerful Kyoma there."

"No matter who's there, we'll give them a good beating," Adlet declared.

He decided that it was better to collide with the enemy head on than to avoid a fight while groping about for a plan.

"Let's decide on the specifics of our plan as we head to the Temple of Fate. There's no use talking any more about this now."

"That's right."

"For now let's rest here. We'll depart after we've gotten some rest. We'll alternate watches in shifts of two. Fremy and I will take the first shift, and after that I'd like Mora and Rolonia to stand watch. Everyone else can take it easy."

Following Adlet's instructions, everyone lay down on the ground and started to rest. Even Dozzu rested his head atop his front legs and went to sleep.

Then Fremy said, "There's one last thing I want to ask you."

Dozzu opened his eyes.

"What has Tgurneu said about me joining the Heroes of the Six Flowers?"

Dozzu stared at Fremy and then shook his head. "He hasn't said anything."

"Is that so? That's good."

Why was that good? Adlet was a bit confused about what Fremy meant.

"And there's just one more thing. The dog I kept as a pet—do you by any chance know what happened to it?"

Dozzu shook his head.

"... I apologize. I know nothing about that."

"Right. There would be no reason for you to know. You can go to sleep now."

The Kyoma nodded and closed his eyes. The others were already sleeping.

Time passed, and the companions continued to sleep without a sign of a Kyoma anywhere in the area. Adlet was interested in what Fremy had said to Dozzu earlier, so amid the silence he asked her some questions.

"... Hey Fremy. What exactly is good?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Tgurneu didn't say anything about you. Why was that good?"

Fremy thought for a while before replying.

"If the Kyoma still thought of me as a companion then there should have been a word or two. The fact that they didn't say anything means the Kyoma aren't thinking about how I betrayed them. They just consider me to be an enemy."

Fremy stared out to the west with a cold gaze.

"So they can kill me without hesitation."

From her words a single question came to Adlet's mind. *If the Kyoma still recognized her as a companion, what would she have done?*

She had killed her previous brethren and fought with Tgurneu, who to her was the same as a parent. Adlet supposed there was conflict whirling about within her chest; however, her expression was simply cold, without any agony or confusion on her face.

I wonder what Fremy has been thinking all this time, as she indifferently followed my instructions and coldly fought with the Kyoma. Perhaps it's my fault that she feels so deeply hurt.

Suddenly Adlet wanted to pull Fremy into his arms and hold her. However, his hands didn't move. He wasn't confident that he could embrace her without hurting her, and at the moment he couldn't think of any words that he could say to comfort her.

"Your dog is safe. That's a good thing."

They were bland, harmless words. Yet he still said them.

"It's been years. I've had him as a pet since I was a child. If he's been abandoned..." Fremy grew quiet. "No, he's alright. He was a clever puppy. And he had good legs. He'll definitely be able to make it, even if he's in the wild."

"I like dogs a lot too. After the Majin is defeated, will you let me meet him?"

"... Sure. That sounds nice."

Adlet didn't know why Fremy had hesitated to answer, but without another word she looked away from Adlet's gaze and went back to watching the silent forest.

"Before that, we have to deal with the Black Barren Flower. We have to uncover the truth about it and destroy it."

"It probably won't be an easy fight," Adlet replied. *Nevertheless, there is value in trying.*

Until now, Tgurneu's strategy had been completely shrouded in mystery. This was the first clue they had gotten towards revealing everything. From now on it would

be Adlet and the others' turn to go on the offensive, and it would be Tgurneu's turn to be afraid.

He would make Tgurneu regret not killing Dozzu. Adlet would make him realize just how big of a failure it was to carelessly give the world's strongest man any information.

"Hayuha. The truth behind the Majin. The facts concerning the Saint of the Single Flower. The mysteries we're chasing might be surprisingly deep," Fremy muttered with her usual cold tone.

#

Dozzu was busy thinking about his current predicament as he nodded off.

For starters, he had done well. He had gained the cooperation of the Six Flowers, and he had succeeded in getting them to head to the Temple of Fate. There had been a possibility that he could succeed with the first, but there had been no proof that he would have been successful with the second.

For so long, he had been unable to get close to The Temple of Fate. Dozzu believed that the Temple held the indispensable key his side needed for victory. If his faction had won the fight within the Illusion Fog Barrier then he would have been able to make Tgurneu follow his commands as promised in their pact. And probably he would have also been able to easily acquire whatever was at the temple too.

However, at the moment, cooperating with the Heroes of the Six Flowers and heading to the Temple of Fate was his only option.

It seemed like Adlet was intent on using them, but Dozzu didn't care about that. At the same time, he and Nashetania planned to use the Six Flowers as much as possible.

In addition, he had another goal: uncover Tgurneu's true objective. Although he could guess, he needed to find out just how Tgurneu intended on carrying his plan to fruition. And that answer was also perhaps at the Temple of Fate.

He had a mountain of things that he needed to do, and the struggle would probably be like walking along a tightrope all the way until the very end. Nevertheless, Dozzu had absolutely no intention of giving up.

#

Time passed and dawn came. It was the eighteenth morning after the Majin had awoken.

"... Our clues are coming to an end," Tgurneu muttered.

He'd discarded the body of the yeti he'd used up until yesterday. At the moment he had taken the form of a giant wolf with countless antennae sprouting out from his shoulders. His true form was that of a fig fruit, which was within the wolf's mouth.

Tgurneu was in the plains at the center of the Wailing Demon Territory. It was called the Plain of Severed Ears, because in the past it was where the Saint of the Single Flower lost an ear to a Kyoma attack. Tgurneu had his forces stretched out around the Eternal Flower at the center of the Plains.

Right beside him was a bird Kyoma waiting for his command, who he called the Dark Specialist Number 2. He specialized in flying quickly, and as Tgurneu's close aide, he bore the responsibility of scouting and sending messages. And due to the nature of his role, he had the position of being able to know Tgurneu's entire plan.

"I wonder if the Six Flowers are sleeping. Or are they in the middle of a conversation? There's no way they're foolish enough to kill Dozzu and his group."

His subordinates were scattered about the Plain of Severed Ears, searching for the Six Flowers. And though he hadn't received word that the Flowers had been found, his voice still sounded composed and full of confidence.

"We are taking up positions here. I predict that they will pass through the Fainting Mountain range," Number 2 said.

"But I think it will be tough to pass through there," Tgurneu replied.

"Or information about the Temple of Fate may have been leaked to Dozzu," said Number 2.

"I don't think that's possible," Tgurneu replied as he moved his tentacles.

If the Six Flowers are trying to head for the Land of Fallen Tears, then the battle is already over, Kyoma Number 2 thought. The power of the Black Barren Flower would probably wipe them all out before they could even reach their destination. And since it would be trouble if Cargikk killed three of the Flowers, we had to think of a way to stop Cargikk's followers from scoring.

But supposing Dozzu knew about the Temple of Fate, it would only prolong the battle somewhat. In the end it wouldn't be a problem. Even if they reached the Temple of Fate, it was impossible for them to find out about the Black Barren Flower.

At any rate, it would only be a minor problem.

An eagle Kyoma flew in from the west. It didn't have a name or a number; it was just a low-class Kyoma.

"Master Tgurneu, my report..."

"Greetings!" Tgurneu shouted, causing the eagle Kyoma to draw back.

That Kyoma lacks discipline, Kyoma Number Two thought.

"Good morning, Master Tgurneu. Today will be a lucky day above all others."

"Good. Your report."

"Cargikk's forces are still not moving. There are only a few scouts that headed to the Plain of Severed Ears."

"Is that right? You can leave now."

The eagle Kyoma flapped its wings and returned to its waiting spot. The movement of Cargikk's troops didn't seem like a problem either. They were following the fake information that Tgurneu had circulated among their forces, so at the moment they would not leave the Land of Fallen Tears.

Everything is going well. It is a failure that I haven't been able to kill even one of the Six Flowers, but even that is just a trivial matter, Tgurneu thought as he waved about his antennae.

"What may I ask is the problem, master Tgurneu?"

"I'm thinking of playing just a little bit, but no ideas are coming to me."

"How do you plan to proceed?"

"I'm thinking of inviting the Heroes of the Six Flowers to the Temple of Fate. What do you think? It'll probably make things interesting." Tgurneu smiled with drool dripping from his mouth.

Of course it would certainly be interesting, Kyoma Number 2 thought.

"Should I put up a sign? 'Welcome, Heroes of the Six Flowers, here is the Temple of Fate,' or something like that?" Tgurneu wondered, and continued to smile.





Chapter Two: Part One

It was the eighteenth day after the Majin had awoken, and the seventh day since Adlet and the others had infiltrated the Wailing Demon Territory. The weather was even clearer than the previous day's, completely cloudless, and the sun lit up the dark red-tinted land of the Wailing Demon Territory.

It was just after noon, and Adlet and the others were advancing through the dangerous mountain passage to the north of the center of the Wailing Demon Territory.

Walking at the front of the pack, Dozzu turned around and asked, "Adlet-san, would you mind showing me the map?"

Adlet placed the map on the ground and Dozzu pointed to a location with his forelegs.

"Tgurneu built a lookout at the summit of this mountain. It can probably see the entire area, all the way down to the base. Destroying it would be easy, but I wonder if it would be safer to circumvent it and pass through the valley to the south."

"Got it. Everyone, let's go to the southwest," Adlet said, urging the others to continue further down the mountain path.

Although Adlet and the others were only able to get a little bit of sleep last night, they'd had no choice but to depart as soon as possible. Goldof, Nashetania, and Chamo were still injured, but everyone else was fine. So they pushed themselves onward in a rush. There was a chance that they would be ambushed by Tgurneu if they stayed in the same place; plus, they wanted to reach the Temple of Fate that Dozzu had mentioned as soon as possible.

"The enemy," Dozzu whispered.

They could see a Kyoma within the shade of a boulder. It hadn't noticed them yet. Fremy readied her rifle in an instant, moving her hands faster than the eye could see. At the same time, Mora lightly touched her hand to the tip of Fremy's barrel.

Fremy fired the rifle and the bullet sailed right through the Kyoma's head, but the ring of the gunshot couldn't be heard by anyone other than those nearby. Mora had used the power of the Mountain Echoes to cancel out the sound. The two of them had been using that method to pick off the scouts one by one.

They had researched their path well, and so far their travels had gone smoothly. It had been less than half a day since they'd departed, yet they were already nearing the Fainting Mountains.

And as for the pending problem of Cargikk's canyon—with Dozzu's guidance, they were able to cross it easily. When Dozzu chanted the incantation written on the stakes hidden in the canyon's walls, cold air filled the bottom of the valley and created a path. According to Dozzu, he'd been allies with the Saint of Ice three generations ago.

Even after getting out of the valley, they were able to safely advance, avoiding the enemy under Dozzu's directions. He understood Tgurneu's forces, so he was able to accurately predict where the Kyoma would be obstructing their path.

"There is a possibility that while we're in the valley we could be discovered from the top, and Mora-san can't use her second sight there. I think either Fremy-san should snipe them, or Chamo-san's Jyuma should confront them."

Dozzu was directing the team quite efficiently, so there was nowhere for Adlet to step in with his own opinion.

"Dozzu is more reliable than you," Fremy said coldly.

Adlet laughed and replied, "I praise him for his considerable efforts. But I wonder if those efforts are greater than mine, since I'm the strongest man in the world."

From his position at the head of the group, Dozzu looked back over his shoulder with a bewildered look. "I've been wanting to ask you for a while, but are you joking when you say you're the world's strongest?"

"What are you talking about? There's no way that could be a joke."

"...Umm, about that... What should I say..."

"Don't worry yourself over someone like me."

Dozzu tilted his head to the side in confusion.

The eight humans and the Kyoma continued onward in a line. With the most severe injuries of the group, Goldof was at the center of the line protected by the others, sprawled with his eyes closed across the back of a slug Jyuma Chamo had vomited out. Adlet had ordered him to concentrate on his recovery for now.

Chamo was walking with Rolonia's support, but she was in relatively good health, and she didn't seem to be in the near-death state she had been in yesterday. *Maybe there's no need to worry.*

And as for Nashetania, there was even less of a need to worry about her.

"I see. So King Gwenvale came? I was wondering who activated the illusion fog barrier again, but now I finally understand."

Nashetania was walking at the rear of the line. Hans was in front of her, and he'd been telling her all about the battles the Six Flowers had had so far.

Her wounds had healed up just several hours after the fight. She was still missing her left arm, but her crushed throat was back to normal. It seemed like all of her strength had come back as well.

After losing one of their arms, a normal person would have lost their balance and found it difficult to walk correctly. However, it didn't seem like Nashetania needed any assistance.

She had said that she'd joined with several kinds of Kyoma and was now able to use their abilities. That knowledge made Adlet once again realize just how otherworldly she was.

On the way, they stopped at the hiding place where she and Dozzu had stayed for a while, and she ditched her tattered clothing. She armed herself with a new sword and clad herself in new armor. The armor was different than the one she'd had earlier, this time with a black and dark brown color scheme. Adlet felt that her figure in the armor was even more suggestive than before.

The left arm she'd lost and all of the scars left on her body gave her a deteriorated look that she hadn't had before.

"That's right, meow! Listen, Princess-san. I was killed by her," Hans said while pointing to Mora, who was right in front of him.

"Killed? But you're not dead." Nashetania craned her head to the side with a blank-eyed stare of bewilderment.

"Hans... Tha-that story..."

"Yeah. I'd thought that she was up to something, meow. But I never thought that I'd be killed."

"Wait a second. That's not something you should just share so casually!"

"It's not really something he promised to keep secret, is it?" Adlet said coldly.

"Please tell me more. What happened?" Nashetania asked.

"Though she puts on the face of a distinguished woman, she was horrific at the Bud of Eternity, meow."

Hans lightheartedly explained the events that transpired four days ago, and Nashetania listened with her hand to her mouth the entire time .

"I can't believe it. I didn't think Mora-san was the kind of person who would do something like that. I had thought she was someone you could place your trust in," Nashetania said innocently, as if she were blind to everything that she had done.

"...Hey, Ad-kun. Are you alright?" Rolonia left Chamo and went over to Adlet. She spoke quietly enough that the others wouldn't hear. "I get the feeling that everyone is behaving somewhat too casually about all of this. I think we need to be more cautious..."

"Don't worry. It's not a problem."

Adlet was even more cautious than before, and had been keeping a close eye on all of his companions. If there was an important secret hidden at the Temple of Fate, then there was a chance that the seventh would make a move when they got there. His carefree attitude was just for show.

He was also keeping an eye out so that he would see any attempts Dozzu and Nashetania made to be alone with one another. Their interactions needed to be limited in order to avoid the possibility of them conspiring against the others.

Hans also seemed to be talking cheerfully, but at the same time, he was actually checking Nashetania's reactions and trying to figure out what she was planning. And Fremy, Mora, and Chamo were by no means letting their guards slip either.

"Isn't this a good thing, Rolonia? Making friends with Dozzu and Nashetania."

"Sure. But why?"

"So that it will be easier to ambush them later."

Rolonia was slightly surprised by his words. But plotting and betrayal were only natural on the battlefield.

"Hey, Dozzu," Adlet called out. "How do you feel about the current situation? Who do you suppose is the seventh?"

"From what Hans-san said earlier, I can probably declare that Mora-san is not the seventh. Similarly, I can also say that the possibility that Hans-san, Chamo-san, or Goldof-san are the seventh is on the low side."

"What's your proof?"

"Tgurneu is trying to protect the seventh. In order to do that, he hasn't told his subordinates the seventh's true identity. How exactly he is trying to protect the seventh is uncertain, but it doesn't seem like he was lying about having a secret plan to protect them."

"I see."

"At the same time, the seventh should also be trying to conceal the truth about themselves. So they will probably try to successfully contribute to your cause, eliminate your enemies, and protect all of you. So even if they save your lives, that wouldn't be proof that they aren't the seventh."

"There is only one possible item of proof: Tgurneu said that the person who seriously tries to kill the seventh is not the seventh. He also said that the person who completely neglects the seventh, despite the potential risk, is most likely not the seventh either."

Dozzu continued to talk.

"If Adlet-san had not been there, then Mora-san, without a doubt, would have died. Therefore I can say that she's not the seventh. Hans-san was killed. And it wouldn't have been that strange if Goldof-san had been killed by all of you. Also, as far as I can tell, Tgurneu intended to kill Chamo-san. So from all of that, I can state that the chances of those four being the seventh is low."

That roughly coincided with what Adlet had been thinking.

"The remaining possibilities are Fremy-san and Rolonia-san. And you, Adlet-san."

Dozzu glared at Adlet. Adlet had also been aware of that. Ever since Nashetania had tried to kill him, he had been treated as a genuine Flower. And now he knew that Nashetania and the seventh Tgurneu had sent were enemies, he had no way to prove that he himself was genuine.

"Excuse me, Adlet-san, but I think that you should hand over the role of leader to Mora-san. At present, you are a likely candidate for being the seventh. Entrusting the Six Flowers to your leadership makes me a bit uneasy."

"That certainly might be the right course of action."

Of course Adlet didn't think he was the seventh. However, from the outside it looked like he was definitely a likely candidate.

At the moment his companions did not suspect him to be the seventh, but he worried about whether it was okay to continue as the leader.

"When you say it out loud, it does seem right. Maybe Adlet really is suspicious," Chamo said, cutting into the conversation.

"I believe Adlet," Mora said. "And I have a problem with following the suggestions of Dozzu, our enemy."

"Me too. Ad-kun doesn't seem like our enemy," Rolonia agreed.

"But Chamo is also uncomfortable with Oba-chan being leader. Oba-chan is an idiot," Chamo said bluntly.

Mora couldn't argue with her.

"Honestly speaking... I don't have confidence to serve as the leader. I'll just continue to make mistakes and fail."

"Chamo thinks Cat-san is good. Cat-san doesn't seem to be the enemy. And he protected Chamo."

Everyone's gaze turned to Hans at the back of the line. Now done speaking with Nashetania, Hans shrugged.

"Umeow. Being a leader doesn't match my personality. I'll leave it to Adlet."

"Isn't that dangerous?"

"Nothing will change. I've suspected Adlet from the beginning. I've said it before, but I think that Adlet is the most dangerous of us, meow. He might be unaware that he's the seventh and is unwittingly leading us into danger. And even if he continues to be the leader, I'll still think that way, meow."

"...I see."

"What about this? Whenever my judgment and Adlet's thinking clash, then at that time, my decision will take priority. So how about that, meow?"

"In other words, Hans and Adlet will serve as leader together in a kind of parliamentary system. I think that makes sense for now."

"But Chamo thinks it's better for Cat-san to make commands," Chamo said, seeming dissatisfied.

"I don't mind, if it's alright with you," Adlet said.

It didn't seem like the other companions objected.

Although he would continue in the role of leader, perhaps they no longer placed the same wide trust in him as they had before. *But if this prevents the situation from getting any worse, then it's alright*, Adlet thought.

#

As Adlet and the others continued on, the surveillance from the sky gradually became more widespread.

"So the area around the Fainting Mountains is guarded after all," Dozzu muttered as he looked around.

"That's right, but Tgurneu isn't around here. He predicted that we'd head to the Plain of Severed Ears and is concentrating his main force there," Adlet replied.

If Tgurneu had correctly read their behavior, then he probably wouldn't limit himself to the amount of surveillance they were seeing. The Heroes would probably have been completely surrounded by Kyoma by now.

So far it looked like they had been able to avoid an encounter with Tgurneu. This increased security was their first barrier to reaching the Temple of Fate.

Naturally, the number of words that passed between the companions decreased as they walked. Paying attention to their surroundings while also keeping an eye on each other was mentally exhausting.

"What do you think, everyone? Has anything changed?" Adlet asked his companions.

Excluding Goldof, who was sprawled out atop the slug Jyuma, everyone shook their heads. It appeared the seventh still wasn't making a move.

After they scaled a hill, they could see a forest spread about the base of the Fainting Mountains.

"It will be dangerous from here on out," Dozzu said to Adlet. "Everyone, please standby. I'll check out the situation."

"Do you intend to go by yourself?"

"Since I'm small, it will be easy for me to conceal myself. It will be more effective than all of us moving together."

That was certainly right, but there was no way they could let an enemy move on his own when they had no idea when he would betray them.

"I'll go too, meow," Hans offered.

Adlet nodded.

"Go for us, but be careful. We'll tend to Goldof in the meantime."

"And you should eat now; we don't know when we'll get another chance to do so. I'll eat while I'm walking, so don't worry about me, meow."

They knew a fierce battle would be waiting for them when they entered the Fainting Mountains, and they did their best to prepare themselves for that eventuality.

"Is there anywhere we can hide nearby?"

Adlet and the others looked over the area, and Fremy climbed up a tree and pointed to something from the top.

"We could hide there."

"So let's regroup there in thirty minutes. Please watch out for traps."

Dozzu and Hans headed into the forest, and everyone else went towards the place Fremy had indicated.

Fremy had found an old wooden hut. It wasn't somewhere the Kyoma had lived, but clearly a place a human had once inhabited.

It was a crude home with two rooms like a stable, and the walls and the ceiling were both riddled with cracks. All in all, it looked like it would be difficult to live there.

Along the way, Adlet and the others had spotted similar looking buildings a few times. They had even stopped at some of them too, but they never found any humans still alive.

Judging from the shabby huts, it was easy to see that the humans of the Wailing Demon Territory had been treated like slaves or cattle.

"Adlet, hurry up. I found this, so now what are we going to do?" Fremy called to him.

Adlet realized that he was staring at the hut and decided to enter.

"Mora-san, can you take care of Goldof?"

"Yeah, leave it to me."

"Rolonia, you deal with Chamo's treatment. Though she seems healthy, so I don't think you have to worry."

"Ri-right."

Mora and Rolonia started treating their patients. Meanwhile, Adlet and Fremy looked over the hut's floor and the surfaces of the walls, checking for traps. The inside of the hut had fallen into ruin. There was stale wheat gruel within the stove, a few household belongings broken and scattered about, and instead of a bed there was a mountain of rotting straw.

But Adlet's eyes were glued to one of the corners of the hut.

"..."

Fallen there was a small fragment of pottery. If someone else were to look at it, they would probably see nothing more than a simple piece of trash. But Adlet knew what it was.

He carefully picked up the fragment. It was a piece of a flute passed down in Adlet's hometown. The flute was simple, made from packed clay and baked in a kiln, and it had a simple design made with dyes taken from flowers that bloom on the lakeshore.

Adlet's village would hold a lively festival after the wheat harvest and the preparations for the sowing of next year's seeds were completed. Murky beer was passed around, and the men would sing in tune to the music the women played on the flutes. And that was all there was to the festival.

"It doesn't seem like there are any traps. I'll go stand watch outside."

"Thanks. And don't let your guard down until Hans and Dozzu return."

The voices of Fremy and the others seemed distant to Adlet as he continued to stare at the fragment in his hand.

At the back of his mind, Adlet vividly recalled a memory he had of the men singing in harmony. The wind had chilled, and there was beer and the smell of the meager amounts of food brought from each of the households. Every single year, nothing ever changed.

He could even remember who the fragment had belonged to: the old lady who lived in the house next to the village leader. She was a mean woman and many times had said cruel things to Adlet's sister, but he recalled that when she was in a good mood she would hand out fried bread snacks to the children in the village.

Adlet unconsciously placed his hand to his chest. His heart was racing.

"What's the matter, Ad-kun?"

"Don't worry about me. It's nothing."

Rolonia's voice brought Adlet back to his senses. He tossed the flute fragment onto the ground, and it proceeded to break into even smaller pieces. But he looked away so that he wouldn't see it.

Goldof was standing at the center of the hut. He was holding his spear and lightly twirling it around, while he bent and stretched out his legs.

"Have you already recovered?"

"I can't say I'm at one hundred percent, but I can fight."

When Adlet and Hans had suffered serious injuries, they too had been treated by Mora or Rolonia; and yet even with that treatment, it had taken them over a day to recover. Granted, he had been resting atop the slug Kyoma. But even so, his healing abilities were extraordinary.

"I'm jealous of youth," Mora said.

Goldof looked at Adlet's face and muttered, "You seem upset What happened?"

His other companions were also looking at Adlet with concern in their eyes. Adlet was shocked that even Goldof seemed to notice how upset he was.

"It's nothing major."

"Hey, hey. If you hide something then you'll seem suspicious, Adlet-san," Nashetania said jokingly.

"That... A long time ago, it was something that had used to be in my village. I was just a little bit surprised, but don't worry about it."

From those words his companions guessed the situation. At the Bud of Eternity while they were waiting for Mora and Hans to recover from their wounds, Adlet had told them what had happened to his hometown. The only person who didn't know what he was alluding to was Nashetania, who just leaned her head to the side in confusion.

"I'm going to go on the lookout outside," Adlet said, leaving the hut and taking up a position opposite Fremy. He took some light food out from a pouch at his waist, chewed it up all at once, and then washed it down with water. On the way down, he choked on the food and had a coughing fit to get it out.

He understood that he was upset, but he had trouble believing his reaction. All he had found was a piece of a flute.

For a long time, Adlet had worked hard to not think about his hometown. He didn't feel any strong sense of nostalgia or homesickness towards the people. He just chose to feel a deep anger.

If he thought about the happy days, it would make fighting difficult. And if he thought about the villagers, winning battles would become impossible. So for all this time, Adlet hadn't thought about his hometown. He'd believed he had already removed the memories of his past from his heart.

But Adlet realized it now. He hadn't forgotten. He had just tried to forget because thinking about the villagers wouldn't do any good. At the moment, protecting his companions and defeating the seventh and Tgurneu were important. And so was uncovering the truth about the Saint Instrument called the Black Barren Flower.

However, the walls of his heart had already been broken. And memories were already flooding back into his mind.

#

Adlet's sister Shetra was a wise and intelligent girl, and his best friend Raina was a brave and extremely generous boy. Back then Adlet did nothing but follow the two of them around.

In order to save the village from the Majin, Raina and Adlet trained with swords together. Although Shetra looked troubled, she watched over them warmly.

Adlet apologized for hitting Raina hard above the eye with a wooden stick. But ignoring Adlet, who was upset and crying, Raina calmly called over Shetra to treat his wounds without getting upset at all. Even though it left a large scar, Raina never seemed to care. He simply laughed and said it was the badge of a hero.

Occasionally, Raina would say that he would become a Hero of the Six Flowers. At the time, Adlet never imagined that it wouldn't be Raina, but him who would eventually inherit the title.

#

A little before Tgurneu attacked his village, Adlet had been at his house practicing a song. Raina had been watching him. Adlet was trying to sing as best as he could in tune with the sound from Shetra's flute.

The song wasn't difficult. In fact, it was a simple song that everyone in the village sang. But Adlet was a terrible singer.

When Raina sang beside him, Adlet could fall into tune. But when Raina stopped and Adlet had to sing alone, the song would fall to pieces. He was so bad that even the sound from Shetra's flute would stop sounding good.

Raina laughed at Adlet, and Shetra teased him by making a sound as if to say she was fed up. Adlet turned bright red and yelled at both of them.

"Let me feel your throat a bit," Raina said, grabbing Adlet's throat. Then he moved Adlet's throat up and down in sync with his own singing.

"See, now try singing. I figure if you try it like this, you'll be able to sing it right, don't you think?"

Adlet gave it a try. When Raina lifted up Adlet's throat, he released a high-pitched voice. Then when Raina pressed down on his throat, a softer pitch came out.

But there was no way he could sing the song correctly with Raina manipulating his throat like that.

"Stop it! I can do it without your help!"

"Huh, but that was much better than earlier, Adlet," Shetra said with a smile.

Back then, problems like that were the most serious matters they had to deal with.

#

Both Shetra and Raina were gone. Tgurneu had deceived the villagers and taken them to the Wailing Demon Territory. And when Shetra opposed the villagers, they killed her. Right after Shetra told Adlet and Raina to hide in a pot, a knife was stabbed through her chest.

Raina was helpless and couldn't do anything but cry. So he pulled Adlet by the hand and the two of them ran. Then when Adlet was about to be captured, Raina bit the arm of one of their pursuers to save Adlet. That was when a sickle was stabbed through his back. While Raina was buying time, Adlet escaped alone.

"What are you doing, meow?"

Hans' voice pulled Adlet back to reality. Before he even realized it, Hans and Dozzu were standing in front of him.

"Were you standing watch? Or were you just sleeping standing up?" Hans yelled at Adlet, angry with him for dropping his guard. "Pull it together, meow. It's only going to get tougher from here on out."

Dozzu and Hans started to go into the hut. But before Hans entered, he looked over his shoulder and said, "We've run into a problem. Let's all talk together."

That was when Adlet noticed that Hans was holding a strange insect in his hand. It was rough and bony with thin wings, and it had long needle-like antennae.

"The enemy is blocking our path, and unfortunately it seems like it'll be difficult to beat them with a single attack."

Even Dozzu's expression seemed grave.

"What was there?"

"The Dark Specialist Number 9 is protecting the forest that continues on to the Temple of Fate. No, the corpse soldiers under Dark Specialist Number 9's control are protecting the forest."

"...Corpse soldiers?"

Before Adlet could ask him to elaborate, Dozzu and Hans entered the hut.

#

From the ground, the Fainting Mountain range looked like a series of steep cliffs sharply rising into the air. At the east side there was a gently sloping valley, in front of which a forest was spread out. It was not particularly vast, and it wouldn't take two hours to traverse the whole forest if someone walked. And it didn't have any particular name.

"...AAaaaaa."

There were roughly a thousand corpses wandering about the forest. No, they were people, even though they looked like nothing but corpses. Their bodies were completely pale and dried up, their skin had cracks running across it, and the flesh inside their bodies was rotting.

There was no way humans in that kind of condition could be alive. However, the thousand corpses were standing on their own feet and walking around. They turned their heads left and right as if they were searching for something, casting their cloudy eyes around the forest they roamed through.

Something made a rustling sound at the center of the forest. Immediately, the corpses shrieked and dashed to the site of the sound, moving with a speed impossible for a human being. They stuck their hands out in front of them and grabbed at the source.

It was a deer, which was instantly snatched up by the corpses. Its bones were crushed and its flesh ripped to pieces. Soon it had been transformed into merely a lump of meat. After they finished killing the deer, the corpses once again resumed roaming the forest.

They demonstrated no form of independence or will. It was like they were being manipulated by something and had been ordered to kill any living thing that moved.

"AAaaa...."

One of the corpses groaned again.

Each one of the thousand corpses shared one strange similarity: they each had a large insect clinging to the back of their necks. Looking closely, it was possible to see that the insects had antennae and long, narrow legs that were thrust into the back of the corpses' brains and their spines.

The insects were the ones manipulating the corpses. They made the corpses move by sending signals to the spine and the part of the brain that governed movement. The corpses lived and moved by the insects. And from Tgurneu they received the name of Corpse Soldiers.

At the center of the forest, there was one Kyoma noticeably sitting beneath a giant tree. The Kyoma had the form of an insect, but its size was roughly larger than that of a human. Its rough, bony brown body was supported by dozens of narrow legs, and within its stomach was a bundle of even eerier children.

That Kyoma was called Dark Specialist Number 9. He had birthed the insects and was the Kyoma manipulating them and, by extension, the Corpse Soldiers.

Among Tgurneu's forces, he was regarded as the most powerful Kyoma.

Chapter Two: Part Two

“Corpse soldiers?” Adlet replied immediately.

The companions were sitting in the hut, and Dozzu had just said that a corpse army was blocking their path to the Fainting Mountains. It was a phrase that Adlet had never heard before. Even when he was learning about the Kyoma from Atro, he’d never heard of anything like that.

“Tell us about what kind of Kyoma they are.”

“They aren’t Kyoma. They’re humans. Well, I don’t know if you can call them humans anymore.”

Adlet and the others listened to Dozzu’s explanation about the corpse soldiers—weapons created using humans as materials. The Dark Specialist Number 9 produced parasites that took over the humans’ bodies and made them into tools he could manipulate.

While listening to Dozzu’s explanation, Adlet held back his nausea, Mora had her hand to her mouth, Rolonia went pale, and even Chamo and Goldof had unpleasant frowns.

“It was eerie, meow. People about five hundred times dirtier than me were wandering aimlessly about the forest. Even I was somewhat nervous.”

Hans was smiling, but the cold sweat on his forehead belied his cheerful expression.

Come to think of it, Fremy had said at the Bud of Eternity that there were humans among the Kyoma whose bodies could be controlled and manipulated. But Fremy hadn't shared any of the details Dozzu was telling them now. Adlet had never imagined such a powerful and cruel ability even existed.

"That's the situation. The forest is full of corpse soldiers no matter where you go, meow. Unless we have something like a Saint Instrument that can hide our bodies, it'll be impossible to pass through the forest undetected."

"That's a really gross enemy, but are they really that much of a problem? Aren't they ordinary humans? Chamo thinks her pets could destroy about a thousand of them," Chamo said.

But Hans shook his head.

"I tried to kill two or three of them, but it didn't seem that simple. They may be stronger than their Kyoma peers; in fact, their strength is on par with Goldof. And they're quite fast," Hans explained.

"What?"

“The corpse soldiers are able to use the human body to its maximum potential. Hans and Goldof could realize their potential through their rare talent and hard work, but all of the corpse soldiers are being pushed to that level by the parasites planted in them,” Dozzu added.

“Even if we all went and tried to cut them down head on, it would be difficult to wipe them all out, meow. Perhaps we’d run out of energy before killing them all.”

“Yeah, that’s a bit of a problem,” Chamo said, shaking her head. There was no way that even her seemingly immortal Jyuma could fight forever.

“Dozzu. Is it possible to head to the Temple of Fate without passing through the forest?”

“It’s probably difficult. All the other routes besides the Fainting Mountains area would give even the Kyoma a hard time. Perhaps if we search we might find a secret path, but we don’t have the time for that.”

“In order to find out the truth of the Black Barren Flower at the Temple of Fate...” Mora began.

“We have no choice but to defeat the corpse army as fast as we can and head directly for the center of the mountains. Tgurneu’s main forces would probably surround us if we wasted time searching for another path,” Dozzu replied.

Mora sighed.

Dozzu continued. "Luckily, it seems like the forest is only being protected by Dark Specialist Number 9. Either the other Kyoma are guarding another place on the mountain, or they're protecting the Temple of Fate."

"How will we defeat the corpse soldiers?" Goldof asked, but the instant he spoke, Adlet jumped into the conversation.

"Wait a second. Dozzu, are the humans that were turned into those corpse soldiers still alive?"

Dozzu shook his head. "Their hearts are beating, but I can't say they're still alive anymore. Their brains have been completely taken over by the parasites, and their consciousness as humans should be completely eradicated by now."

"What do you mean `should be`?"

"That's the only thing I can say. I have not become a corpse soldier, nor have I spoken to any of them."

"Meow, meow. When we fought before, I tried taking one of them apart. The needle-like antennae and legs were stabbed through the human's brain and spine. So it's hard to believe they're alive, meow," Hans added.

“Hans, what do you find so amusing here?” Adlet asked reproachfully.

Hans stared blankly back at Adlet. “I’m usually like this. What’s the matter with you all of a sudden?”

“No, it’s nothing.”

He was right. Hans was acting no different from normal, but his calm attitude irritated Adlet.

“So, what should we do?” Rolonia asked.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, how will we help the people who have become corpse soldiers?!” Rolonia shouted, and an eerie silence fell on the group.

Hans, Chamo, and Nashetania all had faces that seemed to suggest, ‘What are you saying?’. Mora, Dozzu, and Goldof had faces of bewilderment. And Fremy looked down to the ground as if she were at a loss for words.

“Unfortunately, there’s no way to save the corpse soldiers. Well, maybe there is a way, but I don’t know it,” Dozzu replied.

“Th... that...” Rolonia stood to her feet. “If that’s true....how should we find a way to save them? Will we figure it out by going to the Temple of Fate?”

“There’s no way. Rolonia-san, the Temple of Fate has absolutely no connection to the corpse soldiers.”

“So then we’ll get the information out of Tgurneu or some other Kyoma.”

Dozzu shook his head.

Mora reached up and grabbed the tip of Rolonia’s armor, then forcefully made her sit back down. “Sit, Rolonia. At the moment we have to think about what we’ll do from here on out.”

“Isn’t that why we’re talking about saving the corpse soldiers...?”

Mora ignored Rolonia and turned to Dozzu. “Dozzu. How can we defeat the corpse soldiers?”

“If their controller, Dark Specialist Number 9, is killed, then that would make all of the corpse soldiers powerless. Since the parasites do not have the ability to think on their own, Number 9 is using a special sound frequency to control them.”

“If Number 9 were to be killed, what would happen to the corpse soldiers?” Mora asked.

“They would all probably die. Perhaps it would take less than 15 minutes.”

“I see. So that’s what would happen after all...”

Rolonia once again looked like she was about to say something, but Mora silenced her with her hand.

“Have my...my...my hometown’s villagers also been turned into these corpse soldiers?” Adlet asked.

Hesitant about what to say next, Dozzu paused for a moment before replying, “I don’t know anything about your hometown. But from the reports I received from my brethren... All of the humans in the Wailing Demon Territory were turned into corpse soldiers.”

Adlet winced; the words felt like a blow to the head.

“Stay strong, Adlet,” Mora said to encourage him.

“Are all the villagers from my hometown dead?”

Dozzu sadly nodded.

#

“Aaaaaa....”

While the Heroes were talking in the hut, one of the corpse soldiers wandered through the forest. It opened its empty mouth and let out a groan, then swung its head from side to side, and continued to stagger through the forest.

It looked like a male approaching the age of 20. He was tall with long, wild red hair. His body was covered with old wounds, probably the result of some terrible cruelty he had suffered in the past.

Like the other corpse soldiers, he had also been searching for life within the forest. And like them, he would kill any life immediately after spotting it.

However, there was one thing about him that was different from all the other corpse soldiers. He was alive.

How long will I have to wander this forest? he muttered in his mind.

He could not move his own body; it was completely controlled by the parasite burrowed into the back of his neck.

His body walked, his head shook, and he fought as the parasite commanded. There was no part of his body that he could will to move. No matter how hard he focused, his arms, his legs, his fingers, his mouth, and even his eyes would not move as he wished.

The only things he could do were listen to sounds, look at things, and think.

I'm going crazy, he thought.

For days he had been made to walk about the forest. Though his entire body had surpassed the limit of exhaustion, his legs were not affected and the parasite continued to relentlessly abuse his body.

Don't sleep, don't pass out, and don't lose your sanity. It was a wish he made over and over again. He could not afford to lose consciousness, because there was something he had to do. Even if he had to trade his life to do so, there was a duty that he had to make a reality.

I will meet...the Heroes of the Six Flowers, he repeated within his hazy consciousness.

Meet them and then tell them the truth about the Black Barren Flower.

But there was another truth he knew besides the information about the terrible Saint Instrument created by Tgurneu. He knew that he was the only one who could tell the Heroes.

If things continue as they are then the Flowers will be wiped out. With the power of the Black Barren Flower, they wouldn't stand a chance. So he couldn't lose consciousness. If he didn't tell them the truth, the world would be over.

Still, his determination did not change the fact that his body was completely under the parasite's control. The only thing he could do now was will himself not to lose consciousness.

Please come quickly, Heroes of the Six Flowers. I have to tell you all the truth about the Black Barren Flower.

His name was Raina Miran. His hometown was in Woro, the country of the white lake. He had come into this world in the small village of Hasuna.

And Adlet Maia was his childhood friend.

#

Tgurneu came to Raina's village when he was small and tricked the villagers into migrating to the Wailing Demon Territory. The only people who opposed him were Raina and his first love Shetra who lived in the house next door.

Shetra was killed by the villagers as Raina escaped with her little brother Adlet in tow. But the villagers managed to chase after them. Raina was able to help Adlet get away, but he suffered a serious injury in the process.

When Raina awoke, they were already on the way toward the Wailing Demon Territory. He was on the brink of death, and Tgurneu was treating his wounds.

Caressing his injured head, Tgurneu spoke nicely. He said that soon the human world would be destroyed, and the world ruled by the Majin would be born. However, he had no intention of killing all of mankind.

He pleasantly welcomed the idea of them serving the Majin and living alongside the Kyoma. Just like the other humans, Raina had once believed Tgurneu. But thinking back on it now, he wasn't sure. He didn't know why he had ever believed such a transparent lie.

A parasite was inserted into Raina's body to make him immune to the Majin's poison. And then they were taken to a compound for humans within the Wailing Demon Territory.

They soon realized that Tgurneu had deceived them. There were only three kinds of humans in the Wailing Demon Territory: slaves, cattle, and test subjects.

The females who were of child-bearing age were all made into livestock and forced to have children, who would soon die from the poison and then be fed to the Kyoma.

The men were made into slaves. They raised crops to maintain the humans and were forced to create gates and forts in preparation for the Kyoma's attack against the Heroes of the Six Flowers.

Sometimes the Kyoma gathered people from both the livestock and the slaves and took them away. Many of those chosen were in good health, and there were rumors going around that they'd been taken as test subjects in order to create weapons.

And when it came to the elderly who served no purpose, they were eaten alive and whole by the Kyoma.

The human compound was simply hell.

Everyone unanimously said the same thing. Why didn't I understand that Tgurneu was deceiving me? If I think back on it with a level head, wasn't it easy to see that everything Tgurneu had said was a lie?

If the story of the Kyoma's welcome of the humans was a lie, then the story that the world of humans would certainly fall to ruin was also a lie.

Soon the power of the Saint of the Single Flower would disappear and the Majin's seal would break completely. Tgurneu had said that if that happened, even the Heroes of the Six Flowers would be unable to defeat the Majin. However, even now the Kyoma were still preparing to defeat the Six Flowers, so it was evident that the Majin's victory was not absolute.

With the despair of knowing they couldn't escape, people eventually stopped thinking. All except for just one person: Raina.

#

Ever since Raina was very young, he had wanted to become a Hero of the Six Flowers.

He had heard about the Heroes from a poet who had visited his village. The first Six Flowers admired the Hero King Fulmer. And tears streamed down the face of Peruke, the Saint of Fire, as she laid her life on the line to save her companions. Then, among the second generation of Flowers, Hayuha the Saint of Time's heart jumped wildly in her chest from the rage of seeing Roi the Saint of Wind be attacked and fall into a despicable trap.

When he was still young, he decided: *I will become a Hero that protects the world.*

No one understood his dream. His parents smacked him on the head and told him not to say foolish things. His only friend didn't say no to him, but he also didn't believe him. And Shetra was dumbfounded by such a troubling thought.

But Raina couldn't abandon his decision. He knew he probably didn't have any kind of talent with a sword, but his determination didn't falter. And even though he had been tricked by Tgurneu and fallen into the hell that was the Wailing Demon Territory, he couldn't give up.

The entire time he worked as a slave and was whipped by the Kyoma, Raina continued to look for an opportunity to escape. If he escaped, he could tell the people of the world about the humans imprisoned in the Wailing Demon Territory. And after that, he would get the power to return and save all of them.

For a long, long time, he waited for a chance to come. It wasn't until a year ago that it finally did.

#

What was disgusting was that among the human captives, there were still men who continued to cooperate with the Kyoma. As a reward they received slightly better food and living spaces than the others, and they were given the right to sleep freely with any woman they desired, as well as whip the other humans. They cooperated with Tgurneu just for that simple reward, and sometimes their abuse was more severe than that of the Kyoma.

Raina had his eyes on one of those men. He had been given the responsibility of transporting the ones chosen to be test subjects to the location Tgurneu had indicated. As such, he was the only human who had a map of the Wailing Demon Territory.

One night, Raina sneaked into his home. Though the humans hadn't been given anything that could be considered a weapon, Raina did have some string for bunching up his hair. While the man was in the middle of tormenting a woman that Tgurneu had given him, Raina quietly approached from behind and strangled him to death with the string.

He stole the map and made the woman swear not to tell anyone that she'd seen him. And after taking a small amount of food from the dead man's living space, he left the compound.

Looking at that map, Raina figured out that they were in the plains at the center of the Wailing Demon Territory. Cutting right through the center of the Plain of the Severed Ear, he would enter the Forest of Severed Fingers. After exiting the forest, he would arrive at the Valley of Spilled Blood, and once he crossed the valley, he would finally be outside the Wailing Demon Territory and back in the human world.

Without any sleep or rest, Raina continued to head east.

Even when night came, he didn't allow himself to stop. If he stopped then his pursuers would soon catch him. And to make matters worse, he didn't allow himself to make any light. Doing so would be akin to suicide.

In the darkness, he walked through the plain while tapping the ground with a wooden stick. Again and again he stumbled and fell, and one time he stubbed his foot on the edge of a rock so hard that blood oozed out. But Raina never stopped.

On the second dawn after he had escaped, he noticed a voice coming from somewhere in the plains. Raina held his breath and dropped down to the ground.

"Is someone there? Can you come this way?"

At first he thought the Kyoma were searching for him, but then he realized it was a human voice. Still, he didn't lower his guard, since they could still be one of his pursuers.

"Did you escape? If you did, then come this way. I will help you," the person said, and Raina realized the voice was coming from an old woman.

He cautiously walked towards the sound and found a small hut in the middle of the plains. The inside was packed with countless corpses, with a single old woman lying at the center.

"If you are human, then listen to my words. I am not trying to help myself. I am doing this to save the world."

Raina approached her as quietly as he could.

"Do you think you can believe the words you hear from an old woman you've never met before?"

"...It depends..."

"Can you believe that such a woman would say that she is trying to save the world?"

At a loss for how to respond, Raina nodded.

“My name...that doesn’t matter. I escaped from the Fainting Mountains. I am the only person to escape from the Temple of Fate Tgurneu created. Help me. I need you to tell someone something.”

“What?”

“I need you to tell them about the Black Barren Flower.”

#

That old woman called herself Nia Grasta. In the past, she had served at the Temple of Illusions as one of the female acolytes aiming to become a Saint.

She had been an excellent acolyte. She worked very hard for the temple, and relentlessly studied the sacred texts and the ways to control the powers of a Saint. But she wasn’t graced by luck, and as a result she wasn’t chosen to become a Saint. However, she was instead entrusted with the control and management of the land owned by the Temple, and helped with the temple’s operation.

She hadn’t gotten married, nor had she had any children; but nonetheless, her life could probably be viewed as a smooth success. Sure, her life wasn’t at the level of an aristocrat or a major business person, but her ignorance of those kinds of lives was precisely why she was able to find prosperity in her own life.

In fact, Nia was content with the idea that she would live out the rest of her ordinary life without anything out of the ordinary ever happening to her.

Then in her mid-fifties, she was informed by Toulo, the Saint of Medicine, that she had become afflicted with an incurable illness.

Nia twisted from the fear of death, so she tried to console herself with thoughts such as, “It was enough that she had been given a happy life,” or, “death was something that would visit everyone eventually, so it couldn’t be helped,” but ultimately she didn’t find such cursory comforts to be useful at all.

Death was just fear. The fear didn’t stem from the desire to protect something, nor did it come from having some reason to keep on living. The fear was completely unrelated to reason. Death was fear.

It’s okay if I have to trade something in exchange, Nia prayed. She wanted to keep living, even if it was just a day or even a second longer. She didn’t care what kind of sacrifice she would have to make, she just wanted to live.

She knew that, with time, she would probably be able to accept her own death. That was how it always was before humans died. However, before she could get that chance, Tgurneu showed up.

In the middle of the night, Nia awoke to see Tgurneu standing beside her bed, smiling warmly down at her. Then, without giving her the time to be shocked, he greeted her without ever losing his smile.

“Good evening. Excuse me for coming so late at night. With the power of a Kyoma, you would be able to survive. If you are sufficiently capable then you might even gain eternal life. Will you come with me?”

Nia did as Tgurneu suggested without a moment’s hesitation. The fear she felt about obeying a Kyoma was nothing compared to the fear she felt toward her approaching death.

#

Nia Grasta left the temple and thoroughly erased all traces of her identity, exactly as Tgurneu had directed. The Saint of Illusions and the female acolytes probably thought she had gone to some small town and died peacefully.

A parasite that made her immune to the toxins of the Wailing Demon Territory was implanted into her body, and then she headed off to the land of the Kyoma. She was directed to one of the Temples of Fate built in the region called the Fainting Mountains.

Nia walked behind Tgurneu as they moved through the absurdly vast temple, eventually coming to some stairs, which they used to descend deeper and deeper into the temple.

“I’d like you to produce a Saint Instrument. You may be wondering if such a thing is possible if you’re not a Saint. But even a non-Saint can make Saint Instruments by stealing the power of a Saint.”

Tgurneu laughed.

“The Saints are fools. Although they have been researching the powers of the gods for a thousand years, they still haven’t realized this fact. I’m flabbergasted.”

A technique to steal the power of the Saints. Even the leader of the Head Temple didn’t know it, so why did a Kyoma? The question did cross her mind, but at the same time, she felt that her being able to survive was more important.

“The Saint uses up all of their powers, and then they become like husks. Now, taking their power will be a hassle, but with your strength, I’m thinking you’ll definitely be able to produce the Saint Instrument I’m aiming for.”

Deep underground, Tgurneu opened a heavy metal door leading to a vast room. At the center of it was a plain chair made of stone with a mummy sitting on top of it.

It had a horrific-looking body, with its skin clinging to its bones. Despite that, a large amount of chains were keeping it bound to the chair. It was wrapped so tightly in chains that Nia was unable to see most of its body. Atop the chains its body was wrapped in a brand new, simple robe. And though it didn’t have a single strand of hair, a decorative accessory made from real flowers was set on its head.

Its eyes and its mouth were both closed, and the mummy’s head was hanging down. But Nia got the feeling that even now, the mummy was moving.

There was an overwhelming air of intimidation emanating from the mummy. It was a fear that far surpassed anything Nia felt for even Tgurneu beside her, or Leura the Saint of the Sun, who was called the strongest Saint of the current age. Nia's knees were buckling and she was on the verge of collapsing.

"I will introduce you. She is the human that you humans worship. The Saint of the Single Flower. She is still alive, although she is now no different than an empty shell. I searched for her for dozens of years, but finally I was able to invite her here."

"That Saint of the Single Flower...shouldn't her corpse no longer be in this world..."

"There's no way her corpse remains in this world. Because she isn't dead," Tgurneu said with a smile.

"She also made a foolish choice. If she'd obediently accepted her fate of death, then she probably wouldn't have been used by me. Well, thanks to her, I can carry out my objective."

Nia had no idea what Tgurneu was saying, but she could understand one thing. Somehow she had become wrapped up in an absurd situation where she could influence the fate of the world. However, she couldn't back out now.

“Well then. You will steal the power of the Saint of the Single Flower. I have gathered twenty others besides you as test subjects. I’m planning on warmly welcoming the particularly exceptional ones as members of the Kyoma.”

Tgurneu stood behind Nia and gently caressed her cheek.

“What do you think? We Kyoma have lived for over a thousand years. As long as the Majin exists, the ends of our lives will never come. Don’t you hope to be released from the fear of death?”

Running was no longer an option. She was confident that she would be killed if she refused Tgurneu’s temptation.

Tgurneu’s followers gave her the powers of a Kyoma that cured her illness. And for the next ten years after that, she immersed herself in the research Tgurneu ordered. If she didn’t go through with the research then she would be killed. So with feelings wavering between guilt and the fear of death, Nia created the Black Barren Flower.

#

Of course, Nia didn’t tell Raina everything. She just murmured that she was an idiot and told him about encountering the Saint of the Single Flower and the creation of the Saint Instrument.

“When I saw a Kyoma looking at me with drool dripping out of its mouth I understood that we humans were just food for them.”

It was close to a miracle that she had been able to escape from the Temple of Fate. She had secretly stolen from the Saint of the Single Flower the ability to resist the fate of death, then taken her own life and been transported to the corpse storehouse by the Kyoma. Then, using the power she’d taken from the Saint of the Single Flower, she had successfully brought herself back to life.

Raina didn’t understand what she meant. What was the power of the Saint of Fate? What did it mean to steal the power of a Saint? Nevertheless, he continued to listen to the old woman’s story.

“Tgurneu and the Kyoma must think that I died a long time ago. Most likely, no one is aware that I’m here talking with you.”

In Raina’s eyes, the old woman seemed to already have one foot in the grave.

“The Black Barren Flower has been completed. I was a fool.” She ground her teeth. “Tgurneu is the worst kind of liar. Now that is has come to this...if I had known... If I had known!” Tears fell from the old woman’s eyes. “No... Maybe this would have happened after all.”

“Tell me, what is that Black Barren Flower?”

The old woman embraced Raina.

“Ah, I will tell you. I’ve survived all this time to tell someone. But I’m done for. My legs can’t take me where I need to go, so you’ll have to take this information and escape to the continent. You will meet the king of Gwenvale and have him tell this information to the Six Flowers. If you can’t do that then you will go to the Head Temple.”

“I understand, so tell me.”

“What we created was unthinkable. The Black Barren Flower... Even I didn’t know just how terrible it was.”

“Hurry and tell me; what is the Black Barren Flower?”

“Listen well,” the old woman said, and whispered the truth about the Black Barren Flower in Raina’s ear

When she was done, Raina’s face had gone pale. No matter what, he had to tell someone what he’d heard. Otherwise the world would be destroyed.

When the old woman finished her story, she looked directly at him and slowly pointed her finger at his chest.

“I will give you Divine Protection. It’s the power I took from the Saint of the Single Flower. Though it won’t be 100%, with this power you will be able to slightly sidestep the Fate of Death.”

Raina could faintly see a small petal-like light at the tip of the old woman’s finger. It then touched his body and disappeared.

“Don’t depend on this power. It was taken from the stripped down power of the Saint of the Single Flower and was even further stripped down when passed on to you. Most likely it will be useless.”

When the old woman was done talking, she lay down on the ground. Perhaps her death was drawing near.

“Tgurneu...that bastard. That bastard! Didn’t he say that he’d let me survive...”

Before long the old woman stopped breathing. Raina didn’t believe she had imparted all of that information to protect the world. Rather, he figured she probably just wanted to get revenge against Tgurneu for deceiving her.

Raina made sure there was no evidence that he had been inside the small barn, then left quietly. He had gained another reason to survive, and it wasn’t for himself. It was for the world.

#

Raina kept moving.

However, after crossing the plain, he was confronted with a canyon that was giant beyond imagination. No matter which way he faced, he couldn't see the edge of the valley. And the bottom of it was filled with boiling liquid, making it absolutely impossible to cross. He walked along the border for a while, but he never spotted a bridge.

Raina wailed in anguish. There hadn't been a valley of that size on the map, which meant that the map must have been written hundreds of years ago. Cargikk's Canyon had already been halfway completed a hundred years ago, so its absence on the map could only mean that the document predated the work to create the Canyon.

And because the Canyon was made as a defense against the Heroes of the Six Flowers, there was simply no way that someone ordinary like him could cross it.

As he searched for a bridge, he was discovered by a Kyoma lookout. Completely helpless to stop them, Raina was captured.

He was brought to a cave near the Fainting Mountains, and in that cave a parasite was inserted into the back of his neck, turning him into one of the corpse soldiers. He was then laid down onto the floor of the cave.

#

“AAAaaaa....”

A year passed.

Perhaps the power the old woman gave me is the reason I haven't lost consciousness, Raina thought. The ability to slightly avoid the fate of death is the power of the Saint of Fate. Without this ability, perhaps I would have ended up as no more than a moving corpse, just like all the others.

However, even with the power of the Saint of Fate, Raina could not move his body freely. Though his body was barely alive, it was completely under the control of the parasite.

Time continued to pass as he lay on the cave floor. For ages Raina had to tolerate the unending idleness. For the first several days he thought he was going insane. Countless times he wished to be killed. And as he experienced those kinds of thoughts, he wished he had never met that old woman. He just wanted to forget about everything and stop thinking altogether.

However, Raina stuck it out in that hell. He had to, because a friend he'd risked his life to save in the past was still in the human world. Raina lived for Adlet.

Adlet was hopeless. He was smart, but he didn't have any self-confidence, his body was weak, and he was terribly timid.

Raina was sure he was still alive in the human world, although he was probably terrified by the Majin's revival.

He also knew that he was the only one who could protect Adlet.

Right. I am the hero who will protect Adlet. I may not have the Crest of the Six Flowers, but I am still a hero.

The Hero King Fulmer overcame much larger trials. Hayuha the Saint of Time faced off against far more powerful foes. If they could do that, then I'll show the world I can do it too, Raina repeated over and over again within his mind.

#

The Heroes of the Six Flowers are probably already on their way to the Wailing Demon Territory, Raina thought as he was made to walk through the forest.

If that were true, it was likely that the Heroes of the Six Flowers had already begun to fight with the Kyoma. The corpse soldiers had been released into the forest three days ago, so they had probably been unleashed to ambush the Heroes of the Six Flowers. He couldn't think of any other reason as to why the Kyoma would move the corpse soldiers.

I wonder where the Flowers are. Are they heading for this forest? Or are they ignoring it and heading in a different direction? Or is it possible that they've already been wiped out by the power of the Black Barren Flower?

...Please, Heroes of the Six Flowers. Please be alive, Raina prayed in his heart.

But how will I be able to give out the information even if The Heroes are alive?

His body was under the control of the parasite. He couldn't walk to wherever the Heroes were, and even if the Flowers approached him, Raina couldn't communicate with them.

There was only one way. He had to be saved by the Six Flowers. They would remove the parasite and then he would be able to talk again. There was no other way.

Raina didn't know what kind of characteristics the parasite in his body possessed, and he didn't know if it was even possible to remove the parasite at all. But the Six Flowers were heroes who possessed superhuman power. There must be Saints among them who had power that surpassed human comprehension.

Raina believed that, through their powers, it wouldn't be impossible for them to remove the parasite from him and help him.

But how can I get the Six Flowers to help me?

Even though the corpse soldiers had originally been human, at the moment, the Heroes would probably kill them all without hesitation. And of course, Raina would be killed as well.

And even if they don't want to kill the corpse soldiers, would they help us?

Even if they thought about helping the corpse soldiers, the Six Flowers may not have the freedom to act on those feelings. The Flowers were in the middle of a battle to the death. They might give up on saving the corpse soldiers and just kill them all. Or they might avoid a confrontation and pass them completely. And if they went with either of those options, Raina wouldn't be able to tell them the truth about the Black Barren Flower.

So what should I do? he wondered, before coming to the only conclusion. He had to convey to the Heroes that he was alive. And he had to tell them the truth about the Saint Instrument known as the Black Barren Flower.

But is that even possible?

Raina couldn't move his body. He couldn't talk. *Is it possible in such a condition?*

Nevertheless, Raina couldn't give up. Even though he couldn't move his body, and even though he'd been changed into a corpse soldier, Raina was still alive. He absolutely believed there was hope, so long as he didn't give up.

...Please, Heroes of the Six Flowers, Raina called out within his mind. The Saint of the Single Flower. The Goddess of Fate. Hear my request. It doesn't matter what happens to my life. I don't care if I die after telling the truth of the Black Barren Flower. Just allow me to cross paths with the Six Flowers.

#

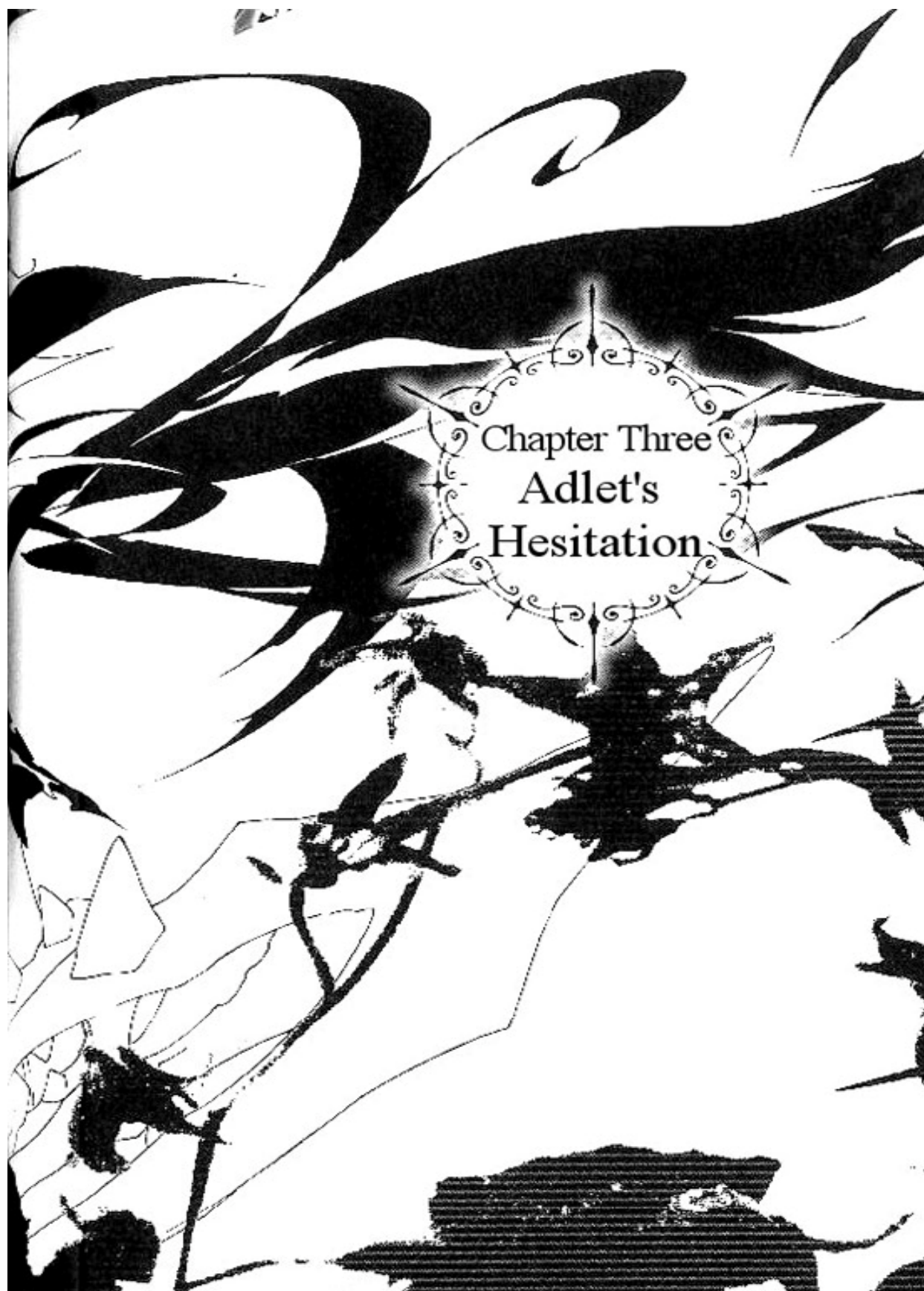
There was a small hut a slight distance from the forest where the corpse soldiers were wandering about. Inside, the Heroes of the Six Flowers were sitting quietly.

Adlet's lips quivered as he stared at the map. The words Dozzu had said were repeating over and over again within his heart. All of the villagers, without any exceptions, had been turned into corpse soldiers.

"Ad-kun, are you alright?" Rolonia asked, drawing close and peering at his face.

I'm good. I'm the strongest man in the world, Adlet tried to say with a laugh. But his mouth didn't move, and not even a smile touched his face.





Chapter Three: Part One

Memories of his hometown rushed about the back of Adlet's mind: the face of the old woman who always gave out sweets, the face of the old man who scolded Adlet and Raina after one of their pranks, the face of the village leader who taught him how to make cheese.

Clearly, they must all be dead, and he had to give up on ever seeing them again.

However, at the moment, Adlet was shocked to the point that he couldn't stop shaking. The truth was that in his heart he'd still been holding onto hope; he'd just been acting so that people wouldn't see his true feelings.

"...Ad-kun, hang in there."

Don't worry, I am the Strongest Man in the World, he tried to say back to Rolonia, but the words wouldn't come out.

"What happened, Adlet-san? Is there someone you know among the corpse soldiers or something?" Nashetania asked. She wasn't aware of Adlet's situation, and she seemed worried.

"...Dozzu, is it really... impossible? Is it impossible to help the people turned into corpse soldiers?"

Confused, Dozzu replied, "I don't know of a way, at least. And it doesn't seem like it can be done."

Is that really so? Adlet wondered. He hadn't seen the corpse soldiers in person, and at the moment, he still didn't know anything about them. *Isn't there some way to help them? Isn't there some kind of clue that could be found with Mora or Rolonia's power?*

"If we kill Dark Specialist Number 9... all of the corpse soldiers will die?" He'd heard it before, but Adlet had to make sure.

Dozzu nodded.

"...Although this seems painful, meow, we don't have time to be sad," Hans said. "Now's the time to fight. We have to kill Dark Specialist Number 9 as soon as possible and head to The Temple of Fate."

"Hey, what are you saying, Hans-san?!" Rolonia said, standing to her feet.

"We... we have to think! How can we save the corpse soldiers?! Finding out the truth of the Black Barren Flower is important too, but... p-pe-people's lives are... are also important!" Not used to asserting herself, Rolonia stuttered as she shouted.

"Rolonia. Don't shout. The Kyoma will find us," Hans said coolly, and the room went quiet again.

After a while, it seemed like Fremy became fed up with the situation and said, "Though it's difficult to say this, Rolonia, you are the only one here who thinks that."

"...Huh?"

Adlet understood. Hans, Chamo, Dozzu, and Nashetania didn't recognize the corpse soldiers as anything other than simple enemies. And despite the fact that Mora and Goldof would want to refrain from killing those who used to be humans, those feelings didn't mean they thought they had to help them.

Fremy hadn't been explicit about where she stood on the issue, but she probably didn't think the group should save the corpse soldiers as Rolonia was suggesting.

"That... But, they're... still human."

"Rolonia-san. They are no longer human. They are just moving corpses," Dozzu said.

"But their hearts are still beating..."

Rolonia looked around her and finally realized that she didn't have anyone on her side. She looked to Adlet, her eyes pleading for his help.

"Ad-kun... do you think... I mean, how do you feel about all of this?"

Adlet didn't answer. *Let's help the corpse soldiers.* He could feel those words on the tip of his tongue, but there was no way he could say them.

As Hans had said, at the moment it was a battle of time. They had to find out the truth of the Black Barren Flower before Tgurneu made his way to the Temple of Fate. They couldn't allow themselves to waste time.

The Heroes of the Six Flowers were fighting to save the entire world. He couldn't give anyone special treatment, even if they were people from his hometown. His feelings about his hometown were personal, and leaders couldn't allow their personal feelings to influence others.

There was no way he could make the same mistake as Mora and Goldof, who had both allowed their true feelings to control them, and as a result had placed their companions in danger.

Yet despite coming to that conclusion, Adlet still said, "Sorry, let me think about it a little bit."

He stood and walked deeper into the room to escape the others. Along the way his eyes met Fremy's, which were looking at him with what seemed like concern.

"Hey, Fremy. Did... you know? Did you know what had happened to the people from my hometown?"

"When I was cast away by Tgurneu, there were humans that were still alive. I thought they may have all been killed, but I feared that you might lose your resolve and your hope if I told you, so I didn't say anything."

"...I see."

Adlet made his way deeper into the hut and sat in the next room.

His response should have been obvious. The most important thing was to find out the truth of the Black Barren Flower at the Temple of Fate. Which meant they had to defeat Dark Specialist Number 9 and the corpse soldiers and then head to the Temple of Fate as soon as possible.

But is there no other way? Is it possible to help the corpse soldiers and still arrive at the truth of the Black Barren Flower?

They couldn't bypass the corpse soldiers and head to the Temple of Fate, because they would just end up having to fight them at the temple itself. And if they had to fight at the temple then it would be impossible to inspect it to find out the truth; and going to the temple was their only clue to finding any information about the Black Barren Flower.

It also seemed impossible for them to ignore both the corpse soldiers and the Temple of Fate and just kill the Majin. Adlet had a hunch that whatever happened at the Temple of Fate would be a turning point in their fight against the Majin.

The answer was clear. They had no choice but to kill the corpse soldiers. *So why are you wasting time hesitating? Aren't you the strongest man in the world?*

"...Shit."

Adlet raised his head. He saw something in the corner with some writing on it, so he got closer and read it.

"It is probably already over for me. Forgive me, Shetra. Forgive me. You were right. I was a fool. Forgive me Shetra. Forgive me for killing you."

He recognized the handwriting. It was from the Village Head who taught Adlet how to make cheese.

"...Idiot... Now you feel regret, after what you did to Sis..."

Adlet clutched his head in frustration. So the villagers had regretted their actions after all, and were tormented by their crimes of killing his sister and Raina.

"Sis... Raina... Give them back, you idiots...."

Adlet missed the villagers from his hometown, and at the same time he resented them. He had thought that he could never forgive them for killing his sister and his friend. But now that he knew they were tormented by their crimes, he couldn't continue to hate them.

"Idiots..."

#

His companions were quiet after Adlet moved into the next room.

He's uneasy about all of this, Mora thought. Things related to home were not something that a person could easily separate themselves from. Adlet wasn't able to lessen the villagers' suffering, nor could he help them in any other way. And that was a wound to the heart which could never be healed.

"Meowmi, you don't need to worry. He's the type of person who can get back on his feet all by himself, meow," Hans laughed.

Well, it would be fine if what Hans said was really true, Mora thought with a sigh.

"We can't have a strategy meeting while he's not here, meow. So I'm gonna get some rest."

"But aren't you also the leader at the moment?" Mora asked.

"I said I'll leave that up to Adlet. I'll be on the lookout outside," Hans said, and left the hut.

Though it might be hard for Adlet, now wasn't the time to be worrying about the corpse soldiers.

If Tgurneu realized that the Six Flowers were nearing the Temple of Fate, then he would probably send all of his forces to meet them at the Fainting Mountains. And if he did that, then the Kyoma and the corpse soldiers would join forces, and the Flowers would be forced to fight them all at once. No matter what, they had to wipe out the corpse soldiers here and now, while they still had a chance.

Every possible situation pointed to their being no other way forward besides killing the corpse soldiers. They had no choice but to give up on rescuing them.

"Um, everyone. What happened with Adlet-san?" Nashetania asked.

"You don't need to know," Fremy replied.

"You're mean. Please don't leave me out." Nashetania pouted.

"Are you joking?"

"No, Fremy-san. I'm worried about Adlet-san too," Nashetania said, a hint of anger in her voice.

How can she say something like that after trying to kill Adlet just four days ago?
Mora simply couldn't understand how Nashetania's mind worked.

"The people from his village were taken away by Tgurneu. And even if he wants to save them, the situation will not allow it. I guess that's what's going on," Dozzu said.

He hit the nail right on the head. Well, it wasn't as if Adlet had tried very hard to keep it a secret.

"So that's what it is.... Then although Adlet-san is probably suffering, there's nothing he can do." Nashetania sadly looked away. "More importantly, can we think about what lies ahead? The Dark Specialist Number 9 is a powerful foe. We need to work out a strategy to swiftly and definitively defeat him."

"Nashetania-san, what are you saying?" A rare flash of anger crossed Rolonia's face. Ever since she'd learned about the corpse soldiers, she had become extremely emotional.

"So-sorry. I didn't mean to hurt your feelings or anything..." Nashetania said with a puzzled look. It was as if she didn't understand why Rolonia was angry.

Is what we're saying just a bit insensitive? Mora wondered. Adlet was sad about losing the villagers of his hometown. And he was troubling over whether there was a way to save them or not. If they were to have an open discussion on how to wipe out the corpse soldiers, hearing that in his current condition would probably hurt him deeply. Even Hans was treading lightly around the topic and only interrupted the conversation once.

"I'm sorry, Rolonia-san. I didn't mean to make you angry," Nashetania said in a panic.

However, having vented her anger, Rolonia went quiet. They continued to wait for a while, but Adlet still didn't come back from the adjoining room.

"Um, Fremy-san. Do you know anything about that Dark Specialist Number 9?" Rolonia asked.

"Sorry. I know that it manipulates humans into weapons. However, I don't know any more detail about the type of power the Kyoma has."

"Rolonia." Mora cut into the conversation. "Didn't you study under the Kyoma Specialist Atro Spyker? Did you hear anything back then?"

"I didn't. Atro-san... he doesn't know everything." Rolonia turned to Dozzu. "Dozzu-san, is there really no way to help the corpse soldiers?"

In a low voice, Nashetania said, "Rolonia-san. I think it would be best to stop talking about that already."

"Why is that?"

"It's impossible to help the Copse Soldiers."

"That hasn't been determined yet. We might discover a way if we look."

"It's too unlikely. And it would be problematic for us to waste our time with this. We might all die while we're searching for a way to help them."

"But... that... that way of thinking isn't right. Human lives hang in the balance..."

Nashetania shook her head. "Don't you think victory is more important? Aren't the lives of all of us more important? Have you misplaced your priorities, Rolonia-san?"

"They are human lives... to say which is more important... that..." Rolonia scowled, then raised her voice even more. "Please think of Ad-kun's feelings, too. Ad-kun wants to help them! They're people dear to his heart—villagers that he lived with for a long time! What will he do if we don't cooperate with him!?"

"Umeow, keep it down, Rolonia," Hans snapped from outside.

At that moment, Nashetania's face changed. She stared at Rolonia with a cold gaze, the likes of which she had never displayed while pretending to be their companion.

"All of us, including you, are fighting for the world. We are not fighting for Adlet-san."

"But, isn't that just too awful?! Don't you get how Ad-kun must feel, to have to fight the villagers he cares about?"

Nashetania looked up to the ceiling slightly and thought for a moment. "It is sad. It is very, very sad. But it can't be helped."

Rolonia glared at Nashetania, her hands shaking with anger. Mora jumped to her feet, ready to diffuse the situation. Though Mora had lived with Rolonia for a long time, she had never seen her like that.

"We are weak. We can't help everyone. And we can't delude ourselves into thinking that we can help the corpse soldiers," Nashetania said.

"Nashetania-san... Don't you want to create a world where everyone, humans and Kyoma, can be happy? Don't you want to help people?"

In a terribly cool and calculating tone, Nashetania replied, "At the moment, I don't. I will not hesitate to pay any kind of sacrifice if it will help me realize my ambition, even if that means someone will be hurt or killed in the process."

Rolonia made a fist, but Mora grabbed it from behind.

"Let go of me!" Rolonia shouted, whipping around and swinging her other hand at whoever had grabbed her.

Her hand hit Mora's cheek.

Mora was stunned, not by any sort of pain, but by the fact that Rolonia had hit her in the first place

"....A, I'm... I'm... I'm..." Rolonia stuttered, trembling all over.

Mora patted her cheek and said in a gentle voice, "Calm down. I don't care that you hit me."

"Rolonia-san. I am absolutely not your enemy. But at the moment I am thinking solely about how to best contribute to the cause of the Six Flowers. I say this for both you and Adlet-san."

"What are you all doing, meow? Princess-san, come here right now. Rolonia, you calm down, meow."

Nashetania sighed and walked out of the hut. Mora watched her leave silently.

What she said is largely correct, Mora thought. But at the same time, Mora could sense the depths of the darkness within her heart.

Hans could also be cold-hearted, but he had enough compassion to be able to surmise how Adlet and Rolonia were feeling and take those feelings into consideration. But Nashetania didn't even have that.

Nashetania said they couldn't let themselves be influenced by emotions. But hadn't she used Goldof's feelings in order to secure her own survival?

Perhaps, rather than being cruel, she is being selfish. After all, it's also difficult to forgive her for being our enemy, Mora thought. *I wonder what Goldof is thinking. He pledged his loyalty to protect a person like her, and would even risk his life for her.* Just like with Nashetania, Mora couldn't understand what was going on in Goldof's head.

"Hey, Rolonia. Chamo wonders if it's a good idea to get angry," Chamo said to Rolonia, who was standing there silently with her head hung. "In no way is Chamo siding with the princess, but aren't you taking matters a bit lightly?"

Rolonia said nothing.

"I don't know when Chamo and the others may die, but if we do, then the world is over. Chamo wonders if you get that. Yes, Chamo pities the corpse soldiers, but Chamo also thinks that helping them isn't an option."

Rolonia didn't reply. Outside, Hans and Nashetania were talking about something, but Mora couldn't catch anything they were saying. Meanwhile, Adlet still hadn't returned to the group.

#

As the Heroes waited in the hut, Raina was in the forest awaiting their arrival, listening intently for any sounds in the vicinity.

I wonder what the Flowers will do. Perhaps they'll kill all the corpse soldiers. Or maybe they'll ignore the corpse soldiers altogether and head for the Land of Fallen Tears.

He couldn't let that happen. He absolutely had to make the Heroes aware of his existence, and make them understand that he had information he needed to convey to them. But it was all dependent on what the Six Flowers did, and it was quite possible that Raina's life could end without him being able to do anything.

If there was even one person among the Heroes of the Six Flowers that would try to help him, then there was still hope. If there wasn't, then the entire world would probably end.

#

Adlet could hear the commotion in the neighboring room as he knelt down in thought.

Rolonia probably didn't understand that the one who was hurting him the most wasn't actually Nashetania, but Rolonia herself. But even as he tried to heed her complaints, he couldn't think of anything. He couldn't come up with a way to help the corpse soldiers while also searching for the truth of the Black Barren Flower.

That's why, at the moment, he was desperately trying to be realistic. He couldn't save the villagers. Over and over again he told himself that there was nothing he could do. But Rolonia was trampling all over that effort. Even though of course Adlet knew she didn't mean to.

"...Sis, Raina, those people killed them," Adlet muttered.

The villagers had killed his sister and his friend. It was an unforgivable crime. And with that thought in mind, he tried to abandon the thought of trying to help them. But a voice at the back of his mind told him that they had just been deceived by Tgurneu. They had just been tempted by Tgurneu, and they weren't bad people.

So Adlet started to wonder. *Is Adlet Maia not the strongest man in the world?* He couldn't protect his companions, defeat the enemy, and also protect the people from his village. *Is the man who gives up without facing a challenge worthy of being called the world's strongest?*

Adlet continued to puzzle over what to do.

"...Tgurneu."

Suddenly Tgurneu's face appeared in his mind. It was the lizard face he'd had when they'd first met. Adlet wondered if Tgurneu had anticipated that Adlet would agonize over this decision. *Did he think we would waste time trying to help the corpse soldiers?*

Adlet pictured Tgurneu's loathsome face sneering at the fact that Adlet was unable to set aside his emotions in order to act.

"...Right."

Adlet stood up and returned to the room where Dozzu, Nashetania, and his companions were waiting. All of their faces turned to him at once.

"Is the fight over?" Adlet asked.

"You heard, Adlet?" Mora replied.

"Yes, I could hear."

Rolonia was squatting in the corner of the room and staring motionlessly at Adlet.

"How do you feel about all of this, Adlet-san?" Dozzu asked.

"We will defeat Dark Specialist Number 9 and head to the Temple of Fate. We won't help the corpse soldiers," Adlet declared definitively. "Hans, Nashetania, come in here. Let's continue to strategize," Adlet said, and the two of them walked back into the hut.

The companions formed a circle and focused on the map on the floor. But of the group, only Rolonia stared at Adlet with disbelief.

"But... Ad-kun..."

"Rolonia," Adlet said in an unusually forceful tone. "Give up on the corpse soldiers. There's nothing that can be done. We have to focus on finding out the truth of the Black Barren Flower at the Temple of Fate now. That is our only objective."

"But..."

"There's no 'but'," Adlet snapped, and Rolonia bit her lip. "You're too nice. If these were normal times then that would be fine, but at the moment your niceness is getting in the way. Do as I say."

"But!" Rolonia shouted.

To Adlet, Rolonia looked like a kind little child. *Maybe she truly feels for the corpse soldiers and genuinely wants to save their lives?*

"...I." Rolonia looked up. There was anger and determination within her eyes unlike anything Adlet had seen in her before. Right now she wasn't the timid, cowardly girl he knew who couldn't do anything but follow the other companions.

I never knew she could have that type of look in her eyes, Adlet thought in surprise. He realized there was actually a shocking amount of information he didn't know about her.

"Even if I have to do it by myself, I will find a way to help the corpse soldiers."

"...Rolonia."

"I don't need anyone's help, Ad-kun, and I won't cause trouble for you or anyone else. I absolutely, absolutely will not die. So let me help them."

"No." Adlet shot her down with a single word. "Listen to what I'm saying. Don't cause any more trouble for everyone," Adlet said, and sat down beside the others.

Rolonia stared at Adlet with a sad look in her eyes and silently followed suit, sitting far away from the group.

I was too harsh, Adlet thought. But his brusqueness was due to his inability to get past his own hesitation. He was ashamed that he had taken out his irritation on Rolonia, who hadn't done anything wrong.

But at the moment he had to think about reaching the Temple of Fate.

"I'm sorry I kept you waiting. Let's think of a strategy. Well, I am the strongest san in the world, so leave it to me," Adlet said with a smile.

It wasn't the smile he usually had when he was pretending to be confident. Even Adlet could feel how forced it was.

#

"So, they didn't come," Tgurneu muttered. At the moment he was in the Plain of Severed Ears with a body in the shape of a giant tentacle-covered wolf.

If the Six Flowers planned to cross the plain, he would have already spotted them.

"So they are headed to the Temple of Fate after all, or are simply avoiding this plain. Well, regardless, I wonder if I should leave some lookouts and move my main force."

"I will order the main force to move to the north," said Dark Specialist Number 2, who was standing at his side.

"You don't need to move them yet. Just get them ready."

Dark Specialist Number 2 nodded and flapped his wings to the sky.

So, it looks like Dozzu actually knew about the Temple of Fate, he thought as he flew. It was quite impressive that he could acquire that information, given the fact that Tgurneu had regulated it strictly, and his faction had been in the process of hunting down all the members of Dozzu's.

Nevertheless, it seemed unlikely that the truth behind the Black Barren Flower would be revealed, even if the Six Flowers managed to reach the Temple.

They had decided to kill all the humans who knew about the existence of the Black Barren Flower. Some Kyoma had known about the Saint Instrument as well, but if they'd seemed even a little suspicious, they had been killed too.

As for the remaining humans—although the possibility was one in a million, there was still a chance that one of them could have known something about the Black Barren Flower. So in order to prevent that information from getting out, Tgurneu had ordered that all the humans be turned into corpse soldiers.

Dark Specialist Number 2 had made sure that it would be very unlikely for the Six Flowers to find out the truth. Yet uneasiness still floated about in his mind. The Black Barren Flower was a cornerstone of Tgurneu's forces. If the truth about it was revealed, then the victory they had nearly grasped would recede in an instant.

Dark Specialist Number 2 thought of Dark Specialist Number 9, who was protecting the Temple of Fate.

"Number 9, don't slip up, no matter how miniscule the chance may seem. You absolutely must not let the Flowers reach the Temple of Fate," Dark Specialist Number 2 muttered as he continued to fly.

#

The strategy meeting ended without a hitch, and the eight humans and one Kyoma left the small hut with Adlet walking at the head of the group.

Dozzu and Nashetania hadn't done anything suspicious while they had been talking.

Both of them were positive when they offered their opinions, and what they said always made sense. It didn't seem like the two of them were planning anything at the moment.

As for Goldof, as usual, Adlet didn't know what he was thinking about. Even now that he had reunited with Nashetania, he was still as silent as ever. And there were no strange actions among the others either. No one was behaving in a way that could prevent the group from heading to the Temple of Fate. Of course, that was excluding the fact that Rolonia insisted on helping the corpse soldiers.

Naturally, Adlet didn't think Rolonia's stance on the issue made her suspicious; she had always had that kind of heart.

The group heard a small sound in the direction of a thicket ahead. Fremy readied her rifle and Adlet took out his sword.

"I'll check it out," Nashetania said, and walked forward with Goldof following behind her.

"It's not good to let them be alone together."

The two of them could plot in secret, so Hans went after them. Everyone else stopped where they were and waited for the three to return.

"Rolonia," Adlet said to Rolonia, who was standing next to him. "Just to make sure we're clear on this: give up on the corpse soldiers. They're already dead. From the beginning there was no way you could help them."

Rolonia remained quiet for a while, before whispering, "...I'm sorry."

Adlet looked away. He understood what she might be thinking. If he were truly the strongest man in the world, he should have been able to protect everyone *and* help the corpse soldiers. Somehow, he got the feeling Rolonia was condemning him for being too weak to match that expectation.

But at the same time, he knew Rolonia would never think anything like that.

Chapter Three: Part Two

Goldof knew that Nashetania wasn't trying to look for the source of the sound—it was probably nothing more than the footsteps of a deer anyway. Goldof had noticed her staring at him ever since they left the small hut, so he suspected that she wanted to speak with him alone for some reason.

And sure enough, after he crossed a number of thickets, Nashetania was there waiting for him.

"Goldof, you came. That's good. We don't have a lot of time, so let's talk briefly."

"...Princess, what is it?"

If she wanted to have a discussion about her safety, then he would protect her without hesitation. However, if she intended to hurt one of the Flowers, then naturally he'd stop her. Nashetania had no qualms about deceiving him if it served her objectives, so Goldof had to see through to her true intentions.

"You don't have to be so afraid. This isn't a trick, as you're most likely thinking," Nashetania said with a smile. "Actually, I'm thinking of setting a trap for Rolonia-san."

A chill ran down Goldof's back, and Nashetania quietly began to talk.

#

Adlet and the others resumed their journey after Nashetania, Goldof, and Hans made their way back. They were in a forest that spread out to the east of the Fainting Mountains. Atop a small hill, Adlet and the others were examining the forest and the mountains ahead of them.

Adlet took a moment to write down everything he was seeing onto the map in his hands. The terrain was terribly rough, with a number of small ridges reaching across the area; parts of it were concealed by trees, and others looked to be unstable and crumbling slowly. To the north, there was a large valley that extended from south to north, and further to the south they could see a mid-sized mountain covered by trees.

At the center of the precarious Fainting Mountains was what seemed to be the only path to the other side, but that was most likely also blocked by the corpse soldiers.

Earlier, Adlet had heard the groans of what sounded like sick people suffering. The sound had carried all the way to their current location on winds that seemed to originate from the center of the forest. Those groans were the cries of the corpse soldiers.

As Adlet continued to update the map, a single human came out from the forest. Its body swayed as it slowly walked towards the group. Its hands were waving back and forth as if it were swimming, and its head lolled back and forth with every step. In no way did it seem alive.

"Ah!"

Rolonia held her hand to her mouth, and Adlet fought to keep down vomit. He had killed countless horrific Kyoma, but this enemy had a completely different type of repulsiveness.

"I'll take care of it."

Nashetania stuck her rapier into the ground. A blade sprung up from the ground at the corpse soldier's feet and shot toward its throat, but the corpse soldier leapt high in the air and dodged the attack.

Nashetania immediately summoned a second blade, which impaled the corpse soldier in the air. Goldof then rushed forward and checked to see if there was anything hidden on the corpse.

"The fact that it dodged my first attack... These enemies are not ones we can take lightly," Nashetania said with a scowl.

"Dozzu, the Dark Specialist Number 9 hasn't noticed that we just killed one of the corpse soldiers, right?" Fremy asked.

"Right. As long as the corpse soldiers don't scream to Number 9, it won't realize that anything unusual has happened."

If Number 9 noticed that something had happened, the other corpse soldiers would most likely come rushing to their location at once. However, the entrance to the forest remained quiet. *Perhaps Dozzu is right.*

"Alright, we can continue our strategy as planned. No one has a problem with that, right?" Adlet asked, looking over to all of his companions.

The objective of their fight was to take out Dark Specialist Number 9, and thus render all the corpse soldiers powerless. The problem was that they didn't have much time.

A message would probably be rushed to Tgurneu's location the moment they started the battle with Number 9. Then Tgurneu would bring both himself and his main force to the Fainting Mountains. It was unclear where Tgurneu was, but even if his movements were delayed, it wouldn't take him longer than half a day to arrive.

No matter how quickly they moved, it would take them three hours to reach the Temple of Fate from their current location. Taking both Tgurneu's location and the time required to reach the temple into consideration, at the longest, they had three hours to kill Dark Specialist Number 9.

It was possible that Dark Specialist Number 9 had stationed a large number of corpse soldiers in the area around him to protect himself, and the Heroes didn't have anywhere near enough time to power through those forces and kill him. Soon after they started to fight, Number 9 would notice that the Six Flowers were in the vicinity and probably try to escape.

However, there was a way to take out Number 9 in an instant even while he was being protected by a bunch of corpse soldiers: Fremy would have to snipe the Kyoma from a distance.

"The trees shouldn't block my shot, so it's possible to kill him from afar," Fremy said as she gripped her rifle.

But even for Fremy, it would be difficult to accurately shoot Number 9 while he was surrounded by dozens of corpse soldiers. The Dark Specialist was somewhat larger than a human, but even so, the target would still be very small from a distance. Plus, she had to clearly know his position before she could take the shot.

And that's where Mora came in. With the power of her second sight, she would be able to pinpoint Number 9's position.

"If we're on the small hill to the south, then I'll definitely be able to use my second sight without any problems," Mora confirmed.

The strategy was simple. Mora and Fremy would wait on the small mountain to the south of the forest. And Hans was already checking whether there were any Corpse Soldiers around the road that led to the Temple of Fate. Adlet and the others would lead Number 9 to the south. Mora would ascertain its position, and then Fremy would shoot it.

The only problem was how to corner the Kyoma, but the key to that was Hans.

In order to divert the corpse soldiers away from Mora, he would charge into the middle of the corpse soldiers by himself and make it seem like he was trying to escape. If the plan worked, it would reduce the number of enemies and throw Number 9 off his guard. Hans would lead the soldiers to the bridge across the valley to the north, and if he could destroy the bridge, then the rest of the battle would be fairly easy for the Heroes.

The other Heroes would predict when Number 9 was short on protection and launch their attack then. They would block Number 9's escape routes, forcing the Kyoma towards the mountain where Fremy and Mora were waiting.

"Is it really alright for you to go alone, Hans-san? Don't you think Nashetania or myself should travel with you?" Dozzu asked.

Hans shook his head. "I don't need your help. Speed is vital for this diversion to work. No one here can keep up with me at my top speed, so it'll be way easier for me to do this alone."

It was just as Hans said. His speed surpassed everyone there. Adlet and Goldof could probably keep up with him for a little while, but it would be impossible for them to maintain it for dozens of minutes like Hans.

The cornerstone of their plan was driving Number 9 to the mountain, and Adlet had to assess the situation as things went underway. However, if he thought too much about every little aspect of their strategy, he would be unable to respond quickly to unforeseen situations.

They set a meeting point right outside the forest at the center of the mountain, where everyone would meet up after Number 9 was taken care of. Afterward, they would head right for the Temple of Fate.

If things go well, perhaps we could reach the temple tonight, Adlet figured. However, he highly doubted everything would go according to plan.

"Let me have an explosive, Adlet."

Without waiting for a reply, Hans opened up Adlet's iron box. He needed explosives not only to destroy the bridge, but also to lure the corpse soldiers towards him. So he took out three explosives and one flash bomb and stashed them inside his shirt. Adlet had plenty of explosives, so he didn't care that Hans took three, but the flash bombs were precious. Nevertheless, Adlet didn't complain.

"If you want an explosive, I can make as many as you need," Fremy said, but Hans shook his head.

"If you're the seventh, you could use your explosives to blow me up."

"You're so careful. I thought you said you liked dangerous assignments?"

"That's right, meow. I like diving into danger. But only after taking the proper precautions, meow."

In addition, Hans took out some tiny needles from the iron box. He inserted half of them into his clothes and strung the others on a cord.

"What do you plan on using those for?"

"Meowhi. I'm not planning anything major, meow. These will just draw the corpse soldiers' attention."

Hans handed the iron box back to Adlet and then approached Rolonia.

"Don't show mercy to the corpse soldiers, meow." Hans then took a step away from the group and started towards the center of the forest. But before he left, he added, "Adlet, be careful of the seventh, meow."

The corpse soldiers' shrieks immediately echoed through the air as soon as Hans disappeared into the forest. Their cries spread throughout the area, and suddenly the forest was alive with activity.

The Heroes could still faintly see Hans between the trees, kicking off the tree trunks and jumping around. As usual, his movements seemed inhuman as he made sport of the corpse soldiers, but they pursued Hans from tree to tree with skills not so inferior to his own. Soon they all faded into the forest.

"The seventh?" Adlet muttered.

Preparing for the seventh was far more difficult than defeating Number 9.

Dozzu and Nashetania were both scary, but he had prepared for their betrayal. It was foolish to let his guard down, but he figured the risk they posed was small. The seventh was a far greater problem. If they came close to uncovering the truth about the Black Barren Flower, then the seventh, whoever it may prove to be, would definitely try to make a move.

As each of his companions' faces appeared in his mind, he worked out suitable countermeasures so that he would be able to respond immediately regardless of who the seventh turned out to be.

What should I do if Hans is the seventh? Adlet frankly didn't have any confidence that he could stop Hans from assassinating him. If he were the seventh, it would be difficult for Adlet to even find an opening in his defenses and get close, let alone muster the strength to kill him in one blow—all while defending the others from danger at the same time. Plus, with Hans' knowledge and experience, he would probably be able to see through any half-hearted countermeasure Adlet tried.

Letting him act on his own was honestly quite dangerous. But in order to reach the Temple of Fate as soon as possible, there was no other option.

Fremy and Mora would be able to notify everyone to be on their highest guard if Hans drew close. Chamo would dispatch her Jyuma into the skies and order them to inform her immediately if they found Hans. Really, that was the most they could do against someone like Hans.

Adlet didn't even want to think about Chamo being the seventh. That would definitely be the worst-case scenario. The Flowers simply didn't have the means to go up against the corpse soldiers and the Jyuma simultaneously; they would probably have no choice but to run away as fast as they could. Adlet would use all of his explosives to open up an escape route, then paralyze the Jyuma with pain-inducing darts as he and the others made a break for it.

A chill ran down Adlet's spine as he thought about that fight. *I might die*, he thought.

If Fremy were the seventh then Mora was the one in danger, but she was definitely being wary of Fremy's behavior. In addition, Adlet had secretly given Mora a flash bomb before she left. If something happened, she would set it off to alert Adlet.

Another threat was Fremy's sniping. She could pretend she was preparing to shoot Dark Specialist Number 9, while actually aiming at one of their companions. So when they approached the mountain to the south, the group would have to be careful of not only an attack from the corpse soldiers, but from Fremy as well.

It was also possible that she could disable Mora and fire at the companions as they were fighting the corpse soldiers. If that were to happen, there was nothing that Adlet could do. Their only countermeasure if Fremy turned out to be the seventh was to rely on Mora to stop her.

And then Adlet's mind pondered the possibility of Rolonia being the seventh.

Compared to the others, it seemed like the potential danger would be low. On the other hand, Adlet felt it was eerie that he didn't know what she would do if she turned out to be the seventh. But since she was usually by Adlet's side, the only precaution he could take was to keep an eye on her.

Adlet figured the possibility of Goldof being the seventh was low. But there was always a chance that he could conspire with Dozzu and Nashetania and go after the others. So Adlet couldn't slack off on being cautious about his actions, either.

As for Mora, it was highly unlikely that she was the seventh, so Adlet didn't even try to come up with a strategy to deal with her.

"...Haa," Adlet sighed.

Suspecting his companions and preparing for the possibility of one of them betraying the group was mentally exhausting. However, until the true identity of the seventh was made clear, he had no choice but to remain vigilant.

In preparation for the worst case scenario, Adlet constantly carried a single flash bomb and a smoke bomb. When he made both of those explode in the air, everyone would stop the battle and retreat from the Fainting Mountain range. Both their escape route and their meeting place had already been decided in case that situation arose.

"Hans is fighting well. That's to be expected," Mora said as she stared into the center of the woods. She could still hear shrieks incessantly coming from the forest, but the voices were moving farther and farther north.

"It looks like the diversion is working. We should head to the waiting place," Fremy said.

"I've lost sight of him," Mora said.

"He's skilled at covert behavior. You don't need to worry. You should be more cautious of Dozzu and Nashetania," Fremy whispered, and then she and Mora left for the hill to the south.

When they reached their destination safely, the firecracker on Adlet's waist would detonate. When that happened, their strategy was a go.

"Dozzu, do you know which direction Number 9 is in?" Nashetania asked as she stared into the forest.

Squinting, Dozzu replied, "Unfortunately, I can't tell from here. But if you think about the enemies' abilities, we should be able to surmise their location."

"In other words?"

"Number 9 is manipulating the corpse soldiers by sound. If I hear their screams again, I should have an idea of their location. And if all of the corpse soldiers are within the forest's perimeter, then there is a high possibility that Number 9 is at the center of the forest."

"I see."

The two of them were calmly analyzing the state of the battle, and there didn't seem to be any signs that they were plotting to betray the others.

"...Hey, Rolonia."

As Adlet looked over his companions, he caught sight of Rolonia. She was sitting next to the corpse soldier that Nashetania had cut up earlier; Goldof had hidden it where the other corpse soldiers couldn't easily find it. Her eyes were closed, and her hands were on the soldier's throat.

"Don't close your eyes. We're in enemy territory."

"Ah, so—sorry," Rolonia said, opening her eyes.

"What were you doing?"

"...I was trying to see what had happened to the corpse soldier's body by examining its blood."

Rolonia bent down, touched her mouth to the wound in the corpse soldier's stomach, and slurped its blood. She had the special ability to analyze the details of a being by the taste of their blood.

"Don't tell me you're searching for a way to help them?" Adlet asked, his tone a tad aggressive.

Rolonia shook her head in a panic.

"No, no, I'm not. I'm just checking.... It's so that we can fight them."

Adlet didn't need to ask anything more than that.

The next instant, the firecracker in the pouch at Adlet's waist went off. Fremy and Mora had safely arrived at their position.

Without Adlet needing to say a word, everyone started to dash towards the forest.

It seemed that most of the corpse soldiers had followed Hans and disappeared. However, there was one corpse soldier still remaining that had climbed up a tree. As Adlet and the others saw it, the soldier opened its mouth to scream.

"Take it out!"

Adlet's paralyzing needles pierced the soldier's throat and Dozzu electrocuted it. Goldof then charged at another corpse that appeared. The soldier was able to stop the spear with its hands, but eventually Goldof's weapon pushed through them and stabbed through its stomach.

"What are you doing, Rolonia!?" Adlet shouted.

Rolonia had rushed towards the fallen corpse soldier and was touching its body. It looked like she was trying to heal it.

There's no way she's really trying to heal the corpse soldiers, is there? Adlet wondered. However, it was soon clear that Rolonia was only confirming whether or not the corpse soldier was dead.

After looking at the corpse soldier with sadness in her eyes, she followed after Adlet and the others.

Rolonia, don't think anything stupid, Adlet thought, even though just a little while ago, the person thinking foolish thoughts had been him.

#

Raina could hear shrieks coming from far away. The next instant, Raina's body—which had been wandering near the valley—shook as if a current had rushed through it. Then his body broke into a dash as fast as his legs could carry him in the direction of the sound.

At first he couldn't understand why the corpse soldiers were shouting in the distance or why he had suddenly launched into a sprint, but soon it dawned on him. The battle with the Heroes of the Six Flowers had begun.

"The Six Flowers have come!" he would have shouted in joy if he could speak. At the same time, Raina realized that it was not the time to be glad; his chances of telling them anything were nonexistent if he never actually met up with them. The battle still lay ahead, and he had to convey to the Heroes of the Six Flowers that he was still alive and that he knew the truth about the Black Barren Flower.

And the only way to do that was on Raina's right arm.

"Please... Heroes of the Six Flowers. Notice this."

Raina had been transformed into a corpse soldier a year ago, and he had been lying in a cave near the forest ever since. He didn't know how long ago it had been, but during that time he discovered one crucial fact.

On extremely rare occasions, he could move his left arm on his own.

Raina didn't know why he regained control. If he put all of his concentration into his left arm and tried to move it, no matter how hard he focused, it wouldn't budge. Yet at other times, when he was completely exhausted and tormented by optical illusions, he would be able to move it. The longest it ever moved was for three hundred seconds, and the shortest was about a hundred. But regardless of the duration, he had never been able to trigger whatever granted him the ability to move his arm again.

He'd tried checking the rest of his body for anything else that could move, but no matter how much he struggled, only his left arm ever did.

So though he was only able to move his arm for a limited time, he desperately believed it was the key to communicating his existence to the heroes.

Raina picked up a small rock off the ground and broke it in two, making a sharp fragment. Then he used the shard to carve words into his right arm.

"I am alive. Tgurneu's plan. The Black Barren Flower. I know the truth about it all."

He wanted to carve words all over his body if he could. However, sometimes the rough and bony insect Kyoma would look about the cave and check the condition of the corpse soldiers. Sometimes it would even touch their chests and confirm their heartbeat.

If the Kyoma discovered the words then it would probably have killed Raina. So he had to limit his words to just his right arm, where he used his sleeve to cover them up as best as possible. If a fight began, his sleeve would most likely rip as a result and reveal the skin underneath.

...This is bad. The Six Flowers are near, Raina thought as the parasite in his body forced him into a run.

His right sleeve still hadn't been torn. He planned to rip it off if he regained control of his left arm and then point to the words with his left hand.

But his arm remained out of his control, and the words continued to be hidden.

"Umeomeow!"

Raina heard a strange shout from overhead. It was a human voice, but it seemed like it came from a cat.

Is it a Hero of the Six Flowers? The moment Raina thought that, his body leapt forward, grabbed onto a tree trunk, and rushed towards the swordsman overhead.

Raina could see a swordsman with unkempt hair in front of him. The swordsman dodged Raina's attack, clinging to the tree trunk with his feet. And then, as hard as it was to believe, he ran straight down the tree trunk and leapt at Raina.

He's going to kill me, Raina thought.

But not only did the warrior pass right by without twisting Raina's neck, he also moved to a different tree trunk.

"Hey, you bunch of idiots, meow. I'm over here!"

And with that the swordsman ran away, and the corpse soldiers, including Raina, were forced to pursue. Raina was shocked by how frighteningly fast the swordsman moved through the forest.

Come on. I need to be able to move my arm, Raina wished.

If the moment when he could control his arm never came, then he wouldn't be able to communicate with the Heroes, and they would escape without knowing the truth of the Black Barren Flower.

As he chased after the swordsman with the unkempt hair, Raina suddenly wondered, *Why is this swordsman alone? Where are the other Heroes? Were they all killed off? Is he the only one left?*

As soon as those thoughts entered his mind, Raina heard corpse soldier shrieks coming from far away. From those sounds, he guessed the other Heroes were acting separately from the swordsman with unkempt hair and were just beginning to battle with another group of corpse soldiers.

The next moment Raina's left arm suddenly felt fatigued. Raina knew immediately what that meant. He could once again move his left arm.

As his body ran, he grabbed the sleeve of his right arm and ripped it off, revealing the words written in his skin. It was his last ray of hope.

Raina pointed to his right arm. But the swordsman with the unkempt hair was already far away and had his back to Raina. The swordsman wouldn't be able to see any of what Raina was doing.

Raina waved his left arm as wide as he could and pounded on tree trunks in order to direct the swordsman's attention his way. He would have shouted if he could, but no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't produce any words. The only thing he could do was move his arm.

Then he felt his arm grow numb, and with a sinking feeling he realized that the freedom to move his limb had been taken from him again. But it didn't matter anyway, since the swordsman with the unkempt hair had already disappeared into the distance.

#

"Don't stop! Keep going!" Adlet shouted.

The five humans and single Kyoma charged deeper into the forest. Goldof had taken the lead, and Adlet and Nashetania were backing him up. The strongest member of the group, Chamo, still hadn't released any of her Jyuma, so Rolonia and Dozzu were protecting her as they moved.

But contrary to his own command, after advancing for a while, Adlet came to a stop. The first thing they needed to do was redirect the corpse soldiers and locate Dark Specialist Number 9, but it wouldn't be easy to find just one Kyoma in such a deep forest. However, they did have one clue: many corpse soldiers were protecting the Dark Specialist, and they had to be doing so at a place where it would be easiest to protect him. If that were so, then it was highly plausible that the Kyoma was at the center of the forest around a remarkably gigantic tree.

"I need to confirm what's going on. Wait a second," Adlet said, and then jumped onto a nearby tree and scaled it like a monkey. From the top, he was able to look out over the entire forest.

He could see a large amount of corpse soldiers crowding just outside the perimeter of the forest on the west side. *So if we don't kill Number 9, it will be difficult to charge through the enemy and head to the Temple. But that's okay.* Even if it were possible to bypass the Specialist, Adlet had no intention of doing so.

He could hear screams from corpse soldiers to the north. There was black smoke billowing up into the air, so maybe Hans had used an explosive. It seemed like Hans had already reached the other side of the valley.

Between the trees Adlet could see corpse soldiers dashing to the northern valley, perhaps simply running in the direction of the unusual sounds. He then saw one of the corpse soldiers try to leap across the valley and fall down to the bottom. *Just as I thought, they aren't very smart.*

He couldn't see the south because it was covered with trees, but it was quiet. He had no way to confirm if Fremy and Mora were still alive. Then he strained his eyes at the area around the giant tree at the center of the forest; dozens of corpse soldiers crowded there, and at the center of them was Dark Specialist Number 9.

"Alright, I found him! Let's go!"

Adlet descended from the tree, and at that moment several large explosions went off to the north. Then they heard something large crumble and fall; it sounded like Hans' diversion was successful and he'd managed to destroy the bridge.

"Our goal is that giant tree. Thankfully, it's easy to get to."

A strange high-pitched sound reverberated through the air. It sounded like it came from a metal flute. Concerned, Adlet looked around in search of where the sound originated from.

"It seems like Number 9 has issued some kind of order to the corpse soldiers," Dozzu said. "Their movements have changed."

Then shrieks from all around them pierced the air. The corpse soldiers had been ordered to converge on the Heroes and were approaching from all directions.

"It looks like we have been detected," Dozzu said.

"We anticipated this," Adlet replied. "Chamo, do your thing."

"Leave it to Chamo," she said and thrust her foxtail grass down her throat. She then proceeded to loudly vomit out Jyuma.

"Make them block their path!" Adlet ordered Chamo, then he and the others charged farther into the forest.

#

What's going on? Raina thought as he ran. He already couldn't see the swordsman anymore.

Before had been the perfect chance for him to let the Heroes know he was alive. He had succeeded in getting close to the Six Flowers and on top of that he had even been granted the miraculous fortune of being able to move his left arm.

Where did that swordsman go?

All around him he could hear the shrieks of dozens of corpse soldiers as they all searched for the Hero with the tattered hair. However, none of them seemed to be able to find him.

Then the sound of an explosion boomed from the center of the forest, and Raina and the several dozen corpse soldiers around him gathered where the bridge had been destroyed. However, the swordsman was nowhere to be found and the area was silent. Raina couldn't believe the Six Flowers' incredible fighting prowess and was shocked at their magnificent ability to conceal themselves.

...No, maybe this is for the best.

That swordsman killed corpse soldiers without any hesitation. He had absolutely no consideration for the fact that they used to be human. If Raina had been noticed, he would probably have been slaughtered without the words on his right arm ever being read. Or even if the swordsman had noticed the words, he may have just ignored them and killed him anyway.

Besides, another battle has been going on for some time now. There definitely isn't just one Hero of the Six Flowers in the forest, Raina thought.

Even though that swordsman didn't work out, I will be found by another Flower. So there is still hope.

The reason Raina was able to confidently think that was because he hadn't just carved words on his own body.

During their time in the cave, Raina had written similar words on the corpse soldiers around him during those short moments when he could move his left arm. It was no easy matter.

With just his left arm, he lifted up his body and rolled over to where a corpse soldier was, then extended his hand and carved the words in places the Kyoma couldn't find them. In addition, he made tears in their clothing so that the Six Flowers could find the words when the cloth ripped off in battle. Then he sensed his arm going numb and realized that soon he wouldn't be able to move, so he hid the words on his arm with his clothes and crawled back to his original location.

Raina had managed to write on the two corpse soldiers lying beside him, the two corpse soldiers above his head, and on only one of the corpse soldiers beneath his feet.

He was able to write a full message on the corpse soldier to his left since it was right next to his left arm. "There is a living person among us. Find me and help. I am a male with words written on my right arm. I have a large build and a scar on my face. And I know about Tgurneu's secret weapon," he wrote.

On the corpse soldier to his right he wrote, "Look for me and help. The man with words on his right arm knows about Tgurneu's secret weapon." Raina was confident those words would be able to get his message across to the Flowers.

On the two corpse soldiers above his head, he hadn't had enough time so he wasn't able to write as much as he'd wanted.

"The man with words on his right arm. He knows something important." He hadn't been able to write anything else.

And on the corpse soldier lying at his feet, he wrote, "Help. I know." It was the best he could do, but he worried that the Heroes wouldn't be able to understand what he meant.

Raina spent all of the time he could move his left arm writing messages. His life depended on it. Yet sometimes, even when he became able to move his left arm, a nearby Kyoma would make a sound and he'd be forced to stop moving. And then, even though he had waited so long to be able to use his arm, it would once again go numb without him being able to do anything. There were even times when the Kyoma were close to discovering the words, and Raina's heart almost stopped. If they spotted the words, he would probably be killed immediately. So it was nothing other than good luck that he was still alive and undetected.

That's right. You can't give up, Raina. You will definitely find the Six Flowers.

Raina didn't know where the corpse soldiers with the words carved into their skin were at the moment. But with five of them, at least one had to find the Heroes. And if that happened, they would definitely come looking for the corpse soldier with words written on its right arm.

Raina recalled the time when he had been lying in the cave. From the conversations he heard between the Kyoma, he gathered that the corpse soldiers were being controlled by a Kyoma named Dark Specialist Number 9.

From that, he guessed that maybe the times when he could move his arm were when something unusual had happened with Dark Specialist Number 9. Maybe he had fallen under attack, or something had caught his attention, which made him unable to focus on controlling the corpse soldiers. Maybe those lapses in concentration were when Raina could move his left arm. Of course, there was no evidence to back up his supposition, but he got the feeling that he wasn't necessarily wrong. And if he was right, then another opportunity for him to move his arm would definitely come.

Believe, Raina. Believe that you can do this.

Then, in the middle of the forest, the sound of a metallic flute suddenly reverberated through the air.

Raina's body stopped pursuing the swordsman with the unkempt hair and dashed as fast as his legs could move towards the center of the forest. Dark Specialist Number 9 had issued new orders.

#

"You're using a good-for-nothing little trick," muttered a Kyoma at the center of the forest. It was Dark Specialist Number 9, the Kyoma with a rough and bony insect appearance.

He had been observing the battle as he listened to the voices of the corpse soldiers from all over the forest.

There was a flute-like instrument attached to Dark Specialist Number 9's mouth, and a high-pitched metallic sound was constantly emanating from it. It was with that sound that the Kyoma was issuing orders to the parasites embedded within the spines of the corpse soldiers.

"Corpse soldiers on the north side, return to the center! Intercept the Flowers!"

In response to his commands, the corpse soldiers started to move. However, he understood from their voices that many of them were stranded on the other side of the valley and couldn't come back.

At first he had thought that the Six Flowers would cut across the forest and head for the Temple of Fate. However, the enemy strayed away from that path and went north. The move had confused him, but then he realized it had been a diversion, and another group of Heroes were now charging his way.

The realization disturbed him slightly, but it wasn't a problem. The path to the Temple of Fate was already blocked, and there was a wall of corpse soldiers protecting him. And Number 9 was sure that even opponents such as the Flowers wouldn't be able to break through.

#

Raina's theory was roughly on target. Whenever something abnormal happened to Dark Specialist Number 9, his left arm regained the ability to move.

Number 9 was constantly releasing a low sound wave, and whenever that sound was disrupted, his control of the corpse soldiers would waver slightly.

The disruption didn't cause any major problems with his control of the other corpse soldiers; however, it caused the parasite in Raina's body to loosen its control of the nerves in his left arm. Raina was lucky. Without that slight gift, he probably would have died without ever being able to do anything.

#

Adlet and the others were about two hundred meters away from the giant tree. They were being attacked non-stop from all directions by corpse soldiers.

"Ugh," Adlet grunted as he dodged the arm of one corpse soldier. They didn't attack with their fists, nor with their hands, but simply swung their arms wildly at Adlet. But he couldn't take their power lightly. The corpse soldiers' bodies could keep moving even when broken. So Adlet went around delivering axe kicks to the necks of his fallen opponents with all his strength.

The corpse soldiers were quick. Whenever he thought they were simply tottering on their feet, the next instant they would rush towards him with frightening speed. They weren't as fast as Adlet or Goldof, but still on par with the speed of a first-rate warrior.

Chamo had released half of her Jyuma, and that should have been enough to keep the corpse soldiers from pursuing them. Nevertheless, the corpse soldiers were slipping past and dashing right for the Heroes.

"Yaa!"

Nashetania stabbed her rapier through the throat of a corpse soldier drawing close to her, but, even with her sword stabbed through its throat, the corpse soldier continued its attack.

"Watch out!"

Adlet threw a paralyzing dart at the back of the corpse soldier and brought it to a halt. In that opening, a blade sprung up from the ground and cleaved the corpse soldier in two.

"Nashetania! Stabbing doesn't work! Slice them up!"

"Understood!"

In reality, Adlet didn't want to save her. But if she were lost, then the alliance with Dozzu would crumble, and he couldn't imagine what Goldof would end up doing. Reluctantly, Adlet was forced to protect her.

"Dozzu! Rolonia! Are you alright?!" Adlet shouted.

Adlet, Rolonia, Dozzu, and Nashetania were the only ones still in the area. Chamo and Goldof were moving to the north side of the giant tree—while Adlet and the others created an opening in the corpse soldiers' defenses, they would attack from the north. If all went according to plan, then when his defenses were compromised, the Dark Specialist would have no choice but to escape to the south.

About two hundred corpse soldiers were gathered near the giant tree and, since there was no indication that he was moving, Number 9 was most likely at the center. Adlet and the others planned to stay where they were for a few more minutes, until Chamo and Goldof moved into position.

Then Adlet saw a corpse soldier jump down from a tree right towards Rolonia, but she didn't seem to notice.

"Rolonia, dodge!" Adlet shouted, throwing the chain attached to his arm.

When the chain wrapped about the corpse soldier's neck, Adlet used all his strength to yank it to a stop. Rolonia finally noticed the soldier and swung her whip, sending its body flying. However, there was no life in Rolonia's movements. She had the power to beat down all the enemies in the area if she fought with her full strength, but at the moment she was solely focusing on avoiding their attacks. She wasn't even shouting out curses as she always did.

"Leave Rolonia to me! Dozzu and Nashetania, concentrate on our enemies!" Adlet shouted.

He took up position next to Rolonia and stopped the charging corpse soldier's attack with his sword. The corpse soldier continued to press down with its arms, despite the fact that Adlet's blade was lodged into its flesh. Soon both of its wrists were chopped off and dropped to the ground.

"Pull yourself together, Rolonia!" Adlet shouted, but instead of fighting, Rolonia did something he didn't expect.

As if Rolonia had just realized something, her eyes focused on one point. She restrained one of the corpse soldiers with her whip and bit down on the parasite at the back of its neck, then slurped the surge of bodily fluids spilling out from the creature and analyzed its blood.

What are you doing? Adlet thought, as he desperately swung his sword to cover her from approaching corpse soldiers. But as she concentrated on analyzing, she was completely oblivious to everything else around her; at the moment, the only option he had was to defend her.

"You stupid idiot!" Adlet shouted as he scattered the enemy with his sword and his paralyzing darts. "What the hell are you doing, Rolonia?!"

The corpse soldier that Rolonia had restrained twitched. On instinct, Adlet rushed forward and stabbed his sword through its chest.

"Rolonia, you..."

Rolonia wiped her mouth and then swung her whip to attack the corpse soldiers around her, but it was clear that she still wasn't focused on the fight.

"You still can't give up on them? Cut it out!"

"Bu-but..."

Once again the corpse soldiers came at them. There was no time to be debating; they were outnumbered three to one, and needed to put all their focus into fighting off the enemy.

"Alright, let's go," Nashetania said eventually. "Chamo-san should be ready."

The number of corpse soldiers swarming around them was decreasing, so it was probably a good time for them to put their plan into motion.

"You're right. Let's go," Adlet said, and the group started to head towards the giant tree. However, Rolonia didn't move. She was just standing still and staring silently at the corpse soldier that Adlet had killed.

"Rolonia, enough. The corpse soldiers are already dead. You can't help them."

Rolonia looked to Adlet and shook her head.

"You're wrong."

"Huh?"

"You're wrong. Ad-kun, the corpse soldiers.... They are still alive."

"What do you mean?"

"I tasted their blood and figured it out. These people are being manipulated, but they're not dead at all! And...and..."

Rolonia pointed to the corpse soldier Adlet had killed. There were words carved into its left arm.

In terribly messy writing, they read, "Help, I know."

"The people turned into corpse soldiers aren't dead. They wrote on their bodies asking for help!"

Dumbfounded, Adlet stared silently at the words.





Chapter Four: Part One

"The Heroes of the Six Flowers, Dozzu, and Nashetania showed up at the Fainting Mountains," a Kyoma said to Tgurneu.

After receiving that message, Tgurneu advanced north with his main force as fast as possible. It would probably take about half a day until they reached the Fainting Mountains.

Tgurneu was sitting atop the back of a giant slime monster Kyoma, staring to the north sky without a care in the world. Dark Specialist Number 2 was flying at a low altitude near him, issuing orders to the Kyoma.

"Ahaha. They saved us the effort of having to find them, huh. They are heading to the Temple of Fate on their own. Hmm, things are getting interesting."

Tgurneu was laughing like a child. He was painstakingly prudent at times, but at others he could be extremely immature. As such, none of Tgurneu's followers could ever truly figure out what he was thinking.

"Well, we can't let our guard down. Of course the Flowers will try something, but Dozzu is the only one who I'm unsure about," Tgurneu said after his laughter had died down.

"That may be true, but he doesn't have many options."

"I understand that. Nevertheless, Dozzu is not someone whom we can take lightly," Tgurneu said. "I wonder what's happening with Dark Specialist Number 9."

"He probably has his hands full trying to stop them. Perhaps we shouldn't expect too much of him," Number 2 replied.

"Don't think like that. If things go well, I think we'll be able to capture one of them," Tgurneu said as he and his forces continued onward.

#

At the same time Goldof and Chamo were running towards the north side of the giant tree. The corpse soldiers were gathering at Adlet and the others' location, so there weren't very many enemies blocking their path. Goldof took a quick glance behind him to confirm that Chamo was still following him—Adlet had warned him that she had no sense of direction, and not to leave her by herself.

Chamo's eyes were cold. It was as if she wanted to say that she knew he would betray her.

"Chamo, I will not betray the Flowers. Even if my princess commands it."

"Is that right?"

Chamo remained on edge, but that probably couldn't be helped. Even if Goldof continued to deny that he was a traitor, it wouldn't do any good.

The two of them came to a stop at the perimeter of the forest. From their position they could see a group of corpse soldiers through the gaps in the trees.

It looked like Adlet and the others had caught their attention, so they didn't notice Goldof and Chamo at all. However, although they could see the corpse soldier forces, they couldn't spot their target, the Dark Specialist. Perhaps he feared Fremy and was hiding so that he couldn't be easily shot.

At the moment, the corpse soldiers weren't giving any indication of moving to launch an attack on Adlet and the others, but Goldof was positive that would happen soon.

"There's no need to rely on Fremy or Obachan. Chamo can crush them all just like this."

"...Ah, I plan on doing that too," Goldof replied.

The corpse soldiers didn't seem to be that strong. Perhaps, if they fought them right now, they would be able to win without sustaining that many injuries. However, the seventh was a problem, and it was doubtful that they would continue to remain dormant. So Goldof wanted to defeat the Dark Specialist as quickly as possible in order to prevent the seventh from intervening.

Goldof also had another concern, and that was Nashetania's proposition to set a trap for Rolonia. He was still unsure about whether he should cooperate or not and he wondered if Nashetania was trying to trick him again.

Maybe I should tell Adlet everything and come up with a way to stop her before it's too late, Goldof wondered, but then he reconsidered. No, that's not right. The plan was dangerous, but fearing the outcome would not solve anything. Truth is, her plan could effectively secure the Six Flowers' victory.

#

"Adlet-san, Rolonia-san. What, may I ask, are you doing?"

Dozzu came back to Adlet and the others, who were standing still and staring down at the corpse soldier. Rolonia showed Dozzu the writing carved on the left side of the corpse, and his eyes widened in shock.

"What in the world do these words...?"

"Dozzu-san, there is someone living among the corpse soldiers, and they are seeking help."

"Frankly, I can't believe it. It doesn't seem possible that there could be someone alive in the condition of the corpse soldiers. To say nothing of the impossibility of them being able to write a message..."

Those were Adlet's thoughts too. The corpse soldiers didn't seem to be anything but dead bodies. They were simply vessels that the parasites were forcing to move.

"I confirmed this earlier by tasting one corpse soldier's blood. They are in a terrible—a truly terrible state, yet.... They are still alive, barely."

"Wait a moment, Rolonia-san," Dozzu said. "We no longer have the option of suspending our battle plan. We've already revealed our location to Tgurneu. If we don't reach the Temple of Fate as soon as possible, then we'll be surrounded and killed."

"I... I understand that, but..." Rolonia desperately tried to appeal to Dozzu. "Ad-kun and I think we have to find a way to help the corpse soldiers. We will find the truth about the Black Barren Flower as well as help the corpse soldiers."

"What you're saying is impossible," Dozzu answered.

"Pl-please, Dozzu-san. I will do my best, and I absolutely won't cause you any trouble. The corpse soldiers are obviously trying to help us. So please tell us a way to help them."

For a long time Adlet stared at the words. *Are the corpse soldiers really alive? Even now, are all the villagers who were turned into corpse soldiers and made to fight us still alive?*

A bout of nausea suddenly welled up from his chest. They were being manipulated by the parasites and forced to fight while still retaining their consciousness. Just imagining that kind of hell made him sick.

The confusion Adlet had severed himself from plagued him once again. *Is there was a way to save the corpse soldiers?* For a brief moment, he decided to agree with what Rolonia had said, But the next instant, something flickered at the back of Adlet's mind.

"You're wrong, Rolonia."

"Huh?"

"It's a trap. Tgurneu set a trap for us. He wrote those words in order to confuse us and make us waste time trying to help the corpse soldiers."

There was no confirmation of that, but he thought it was something Tgurneu would likely do.

"That might be true. But then again, you might be wrong..."

"We can't do it. Give up on helping the corpse soldiers. We can't let this eat up any more of our time! Let's go!" Adlet started to dash away.

"Ad-kun!" Rolonia shouted.

Dozzu chased after Adlet, and Nashetania, who seemed to be tired of waiting, also rushed towards the enemy forces.

Even if the corpse soldiers were alive, there was no way to help them. The only thing Adlet could do was defeat them quickly and help them be at peace.

#

Why, Ad-kun? Rolonia thought as she followed behind Adlet and the others. *How can you kill the corpse soldiers?*

The corpse soldiers were well-organized around the giant tree, with the Dark Specialist at the center of their ranks. At the same time, the three humans and Dozzu were charging toward the corpses. Their objective was to break the corpse soldiers' ranks after Chamo and Goldof's attack. Of course, it was perfectly acceptable if they could kill Dark Specialist Number 9 right now, Adlet told the others.

However, Rolonia was seriously hesitating. She suspected that if they killed Dark Specialist Number 9, then all of the Corpse Soldiers would die.

Both Adlet and Dozzu prepared to attack the Dark Specialist, Adlet holding up a bomb, and Dozzu readying himself to shoot lightning.

However, before they could get their attacks off, the corpse soldiers at the outside of the force rushed at the group all at once. In order to meet the attack of the oncoming corpse soldiers, they were driven back and became unable to target the Kyoma at the center.

"Shit, they're tough!" Adlet shouted.

These corpse soldiers were clearly moving in a different way than all of the corpses they'd fought with so far. They were cooperating and would only attack in groups of three at a minimum. All the corpse soldiers they had fought in the past had only been given rough commands, but now The Dark Specialist Number 9 was issuing orders to the soldiers on the spot as he watched the battle.

"Nashetania, some help here!"

"Sorry, I've got my hands full over here too!"

Though Adlet, Nashetania, and Dozzu were trying to move forward, Rolonia stayed at the back, only blocking the advancing corpse soldiers' attacks and nothing more. The fear that she might kill the corpses weakened her swings with her whip. However, the other companions cut them down without hesitation. The corpse soldiers fell to Adlet's sword, were cut in half by Nashetania's blades, and were charred to black by Dozzu's lightning. But as she watched them take out the corpse soldiers, Rolonia wondered, *How can you kill them?*

When Rolonia tasted the corpse soldier's blood earlier, she was able to understand what kind of condition they were in. Their hearts were moving, and their brains were safe. But the parasites were forcing their bodies to live in a state of hunger and constant abuse. Nevertheless, she knew that it would be possible to help them if they were to remove the parasites.

Still, Adlet completely ignored what Rolonia had said and decided to kill all of the corpse soldiers. *Is Adlet really such a cruel person? To calmly kill people that might still be alive, who were only being forced to fight. Is that the strength required to attain victory in this fight? Is that the quality required to be a Hero of the Six Flowers?*

Does that mean that I'm a bad Hero if I don't possess that kind of strength?

"Rolonia! Pull yourself together!" Adlet yelled.

Throughout the battle Rolonia had mostly been running around, evading the fight. Once again, she was causing trouble for the others.

"Their leadership is commendable. I never thought that we wouldn't be able to get close like this," Nashetania said while conjuring blades up from the ground.

Since the beginning of the fight, the Dark Specialist Number 9 hadn't really moved from his original location. But before despair could set in, Rolonia heard Adlet mutter something softly.

"Yeah, but I have a plan." He then shouted, "We're not making any progress, so pull back!"

Adlet took out a smoke pellet from his waist and smashed it to the ground. Soon the entire area was filled with smoke and, unable to see anything, the corpse soldiers stopped moving.

"This seems to be having a large effect on the corpse soldiers!"

Rolonia started to retreat as Adlet had said, but she could see that the others were doing something different within the smoke.

Nashetania conjured up a blade and made it stick out from the ground in an upwards slant. Adlet rushed up the blade as if it were a stool and leaped up high into the air. Then he tossed several items at the center of the enemy force.

As the items fell, Dark Specialist Number 9 quite noticeably emitted a flute-like sound. Then, when whatever Adlet had thrown hit the ground, all of the corpse soldiers rushed over to the sound to attack. However, nothing happened.

Rolonia guessed that Adlet had just thrown some rocks or something, but due to the lack of visibility they were mistaken for bombs.

The corpse soldiers' ranks fell apart as they scattered towards the different innocuous projectiles, and that was when Adlet tossed a real bomb.

As the bomb went off, Dozzu and Nashetania attacked the center of the force with everything they had, aiming right for the Dark Specialist. But a number of corpse soldiers threw themselves in front of the attack, dying instantly in order to protect the Kyoma.

They are enemies, and yet they fight as such a team, Rolonia thought as she watched Adlet, Dozzu, and Nashetania cooperate. She could barely see what was going on from behind the others, especially with all the smoke, but even so, she felt ashamed of herself.

Through the holes in the corpses' defenses, she could just barely see the Dark Specialist. It was a giant insect the same size as a human, with a bony, slender body supported by several narrow legs. At the center of its stomach was what looked like an egg sac to produce parasites. There was also a grotesque lump sticking out from its body, which probably birthed the creatures.

The movements of the corpse soldiers spiraled out of control, and in that confusion, Goldof bellowed a massive roar and started his charge from the north side of the forest.

#

There's no need to rely on Fremy to snipe the Kyoma. I'll finish things right now. Goldof left Chamo's Jyuma in the dust and rushed into the corpse soldier forces.

The corpse soldier nearby noticed him and swung its arms his way with a shriek, but Goldof chose not to dodge the attack. Instead, he let the blows, which would have killed an ordinary human instantly, strike his helmet and his tough neck muscles.

"Ooaa!"

Goldof rammed his shoulder into a corpse soldier's stomach. The corpse was flung backwards and crashed into the corpse soldiers behind it. Seizing that opening, Goldof advanced a step forward. The soldiers quickly swarmed around Goldof and came at him one after another, but he just used his spear to strike down the enemies in front of him and let his armor stop all the other attacks.

Chamo's Jyuma then surged into the corpse soldier forces, and any remnants of their defensive ranks were destroyed at once. And with the soldiers dispersed, Goldof could finally see the bony figure of Dark Specialist Number 9.

The next instant, the Kyoma let out a panicked sound, and the corpse soldiers pulled back to assemble around the specialist and protect it. Then the Kyoma turned its back to Goldof and ran towards the south.

"You have to capture it, Goldof!" Chamo shouted from behind.

But she didn't need to tell him that; he had already planned to do so. However, five of the corpse soldiers formed a line and blocked his path. Goldof charged forward to deal a blow to the corpse at the center, but while he pierced through his chest all the way through and out his back, the corpse soldier bit onto his spear, and the other corpse soldiers grabbed tight onto Goldof's body.

"Guh!"

Although Goldof would normally have the power to take back his spear, even he was at a disadvantage when it was five against one. And with their number advantage, the corpse soldiers lifted Goldof's body into the air and started to swing him around.

"What are you doing?"

One of Chamo's Jyuma, in the shape of a water snake, approached from behind and bit off the heads of the corpse soldiers clinging to the spear. Even dead, the corpse soldiers still wouldn't let go of the spear, so Goldof and the Jyuma worked to fling them off.

However, during that time, Dark Specialist Number 9 and the corpse soldiers surrounding him fled.

Adlet and Nashetania followed behind and tried to take out the fleeing Number 9, but they were stopped by the corpse soldiers.

"Follow him!" Adlet shouted as he tried to push forward. Without a word, Nashetania and Dozzu followed right behind, with Rolonia trailing after them.

#

Raina could hear the sound of battle occurring far away. He heard explosions and the sound of lightning. *The Six Flowers are fighting with Dark Specialist Number 9*, Raina thought. The swordsman with the unruly hair had been a diversion, and what was going on in the distance was probably the real target.

Raina's body was heading towards the giant tree at the center of the forest. *Alright*, Raina thought. *If I had followed the swordsman with the unruly hair, I would have been killed before I could do anything, and never gotten to meet up with any of the Flowers.*

But if he were able to encounter any of the other Heroes then they might be able to spot the writing on his right arm.

At that moment, Raina felt a wave of exhaustion. It was a sign that he was about to regain control of his left arm. Until today, he'd never been able to move his arm twice in one day. So it seemed clear that he regained control whenever something unusual happened to the Kyoma controlling the corpse soldiers.

...This is great! Things are going well!

Raina was exhilarated. If he were to wave his hand in front of the Six Flowers and show them his right arm, someone would probably realize that he was alive. At the very least, they wouldn't kill him immediately.

The other corpse soldiers were also being made to head to the center of the forest, and as he ran with them, he could hear their shrieks from both in front of and behind him.

The Heroes of the Six Flowers. The moment after this thought, Raina saw something that shocked him. There were a number of leech, lizard, slug, and strange fish-like Kyoma standing in the way of the corpse soldiers.

This is bad!

If the Kyoma discovered the writing on his arm, he would end up being killed. He tried to cover his arm with his sleeve, but before he could, something incomprehensible happened.

A giant slug Kyoma spat acid at Raina. Raina's body leaped to the side, and his right arm swung up and hit the slug. His attack tore off some of the slug's skin, but overall it didn't seem to have any real effect at all.

But the Kyoma weren't just attacking Raina. They were also attacking the other corpse soldiers.

Why are the Kyoma attacking us?!

Without knowing the reason, Raina and the other corpse soldiers fought with the Kyoma.

No matter how he thought about it, it didn't seem like Kyoma would be trying to protect the Flowers.

Wait. Could this also be one of the abilities of the Flowers? Was there a Saint among the Flowers who could control Kyoma?

Raina could still move his left arm, so he tried to point to the words on his right arm. He grabbed his right arm and showed the words to the slug Kyoma.

However, the slug Kyoma continued its attack indiscriminately, and Raina had to use his left arm, which he'd tried so hard to move, to protect his body.

What is this? What in the world should I do? Raina wondered as his body continued to fight.

Chapter Four: Part Two

"Shit! It's getting away!" Adlet shouted.

Adlet and the others were pursuing Dark Specialist Number 9 while navigating the extreme ups and downs of the forest's center. The specialist was continually ordering the corpse soldiers to keep the Heroes away, and as a result it had already managed to place a fair distance between itself and Adlet's group.

"He's like you, Adlet-san," Nashetania said as she fought at Adlet's side.

"I can escape much better than this!"

"...What are you getting angry about?" Nashetania asked, dumbfounded.

"Dozzu, I've got a question for you," Adlet said, changing the subject. "We're chasing that Kyoma right now, but is it really the Dark Specialist?"

"It conforms to the appearance that I heard about."

"Is there a possibility that it's a shape-shifting Kyoma?"

Dozzu thought for a moment before replying. "Probably not at all. Even though the shape-shifting Kyoma can change their appearance, they cannot mimic abilities. The sound that is controlling the corpse soldiers has been coming from that Dark Specialist."

"If I were Tgurneu, I would have stationed a number of shape-shifting Kyoma and used them as decoys."

"Even if he wanted to, he probably could not. There are only a few shape-shifting Kyoma."

So that's the reason, Adlet thought.

"By the way, this is not good. We are veering off course."

Adlet had noticed that too. Number 9 was heading southeast. If he continued in that direction, they would never reach the mountain to the south where Fremy and Mora were waiting to attack.

Do we have no choice but to start back at square one? Adlet wondered. And to make matters worse, Goldof, Chamo, and Rolonia were late.

"We have to stop our pursuit. Everyone stop. Dozzu, Nashetania, you two intercept any enemies that come this way," Adlet said, and the group came to a stop.

With Dozzu and Nashetania handling the enemies chasing after them, Adlet looked at the crest on his right hand. All of the petals were still present. Hans was safe. Mora and Fremy were alive. So far their plan was going well.

"I'll go check out the situation," Adlet said, and climbed up a tree nearby. From the top he looked over the forest.

Adlet could see that Dark Specialist Number 9 had stopped a fair distance away from him and the others, and there was still some distance until the mountain where Fremy and Mora were waiting.

Shrieks had been coming non-stop from the center of the forest and to the north. The Jyuma that Chamo had left behind were fighting with the corpse soldiers in the center, and Hans was fending off the enemy to the north. At least that probably meant there would not be any surprise attacks at Adlet's current location.

Next Adlet looked to the Fainting Mountains, where he could see a number of Kyoma flying about. They must have noticed that Adlet and the others were approaching, but it didn't seem like they were heading towards the Heroes at all; they weren't going to get lucky and find the Fainting Mountain completely devoid of enemies. Perhaps Tgurneu had strictly ordered them not to leave their waiting places to prevent even one of the Heroes from setting foot at the Temple of Fate.

Lastly, Adlet looked about the perimeter of the forest. There were still no indications that a large pack of Kyoma was approaching, but the Kyoma that were watching the periphery would probably advance on their location within several hours. And as for the main force that Tgurneu commanded, Adlet had no idea when it would come.

"Adlet-san! Watch out!" Nashetania shouted, and Adlet instantly recognized the danger.

A single corpse soldier was clawing up the tree with terrible speed and heading right for Adlet. The instant Adlet looked at the enemy, the corpse soldier bared its yellow teeth and shrieked.

"....Ah."

Looking at its face, Adlet recalled the good-natured old lady who had lived in the house three houses down from his own. Thinking that it would be troublesome for just an older sister and younger brother to live alone, she would sometimes come over and helped with chores. Now that woman was in front of Adlet. And she was trying to kill him.

Adlet blocked her attack with his sword and started to swing his sword to decapitate her. But at that moment Rolonia's words floated into his mind: *The corpse soldiers might still be alive.*

"Guu!"

For a moment his sword hand stopped, and the corpse soldier attacked again. Adlet was able to dodge the strike, but on reflex he threw out a kick and the corpse soldier hit the ground. Dozzu charred the fallen enemy with electricity, and the once gentle old woman never moved again.

"Haa...haa...haa...." Staring at the scorched Fallen Soldier, Adlet desperately tried to slow his ragged breaths. *It couldn't be helped*, he told himself. *If I had hesitated, I would have been killed*, he thought, trying to calm himself.

He called out to the corpse soldier with his heart. *Please forgive me. I'm just doing this to protect the world.*

"Are you alright, Adlet-san?!" Dozzu asked.

"I'm not hurt, so don't worry," Adlet replied, walking along a tree limb and then lowering himself down to the ground.

"No, that's not what I meant."

"...What are you trying to say then? I'm the strongest man in the world." Adlet smiled, but it felt forced even to him. "At the moment, there isn't anything out of place. Things are as we expected. Now let's attack from the northeast," Adlet said.

Then Chamo and Goldof finally rejoined with Adlet and the others.

Adlet was just about to tell them to start their attack when he realized that Rolonia wasn't with them.

"...Has Rolonia not met up with you yet?" Goldof asked as he looked around the area. He and Chamo didn't know where she was either.

"This is bad. It is dangerous for her to be alone," Dozzu muttered.

"Nashetania, follow me. Chamo, Goldof, Dozzu, keep Dark Specialist Number 9 in position!"

Adlet took Nashetania along and returned down the road they came.

There's no time, Rolonia. What are you doing?

#

Rolonia hadn't lost sight of Adlet and the others, nor had she chosen to act on her own. She was still following Adlet while she fought with the corpse soldiers.

However, at the same time, Rolonia had been observing the bodies of the corpse soldiers, checking if there was any writing anywhere on their bodies. She felt that there had to be another corpse with writing on it.

People were alive. They were writing words on their bodies, clandestinely seeking help. Adlet said that it was a trap, but they couldn't be so sure of that.

Adlet and the others were gradually getting farther and farther, with about half the corpse soldiers chasing after them. But Rolonia couldn't find another corpse with words written on its body.

Just looking like this is no good, Rolonia thought.

Then a corpse soldier jumped down from a tree and attacked Rolonia. She used her whip to deflect the attack, while at the same time taking the chance to look around and confirm there were no other enemies around.

"Yaa!" Rolonia screamed as she concentrated all of her energy into her whip.

The thirty meter whip was imbued with her blood and undulated like a snake as it restrained the corpse soldier. She took another look around the area and once again confirmed that they were alone. Then she approached the captured soldier.

Earlier, she had licked and analyzed the blood of the parasites, and now she felt that she should be able to remove them from the corpses.

If she tried to forcefully pull the parasite out as is, then the antennae and legs would tighten about the head and the nerves, and the corpse soldier would probably die. However, the composition of the parasites was actually quite simple, and she had a rough grasp of their anatomy. Plus, the corpse soldiers themselves barely had any ability to think.

If she were to pour the blood of a Saint onto the parasite, parceling it out gradually, then she would be able to kill it bit by bit. And then if she slowly pulled out the parasite so as not to damage any critical parts of the human host, she should be able to save the corpse soldier.

Rolonia held the violent corpse soldier down. She then bit her tongue, filling her mouth with blood. Next, she bit the parasite and transferred her blood into it.

If I take too long, it will cause trouble for the others, so I have to hurry, she thought as she slowly paralyzed the parasite.

#

They found Rolonia quickly, but when Adlet noticed what she was doing, he was completely at a loss for words.

"Ah, she's a pain in the neck, huh?" Nashetania said, astounded.

Rolonia was trying to extract the parasite from the body of the corpse soldier.

"...Rolonia. Let's go."

Rolonia didn't reply. She was silently gripping the parasite with unbelievable concentration, while slowly pulling the antennae and legs from the corpse soldier's body. Her facial expression looked entirely different than when she was fighting, and Adlet got the feeling that perhaps she was more suited to healing than fighting after all.

"Rolonia-san, please stop," Nashetania said.

But her words didn't seem to reach Rolonia's ears. Nashetania approached and reached out to pull on Rolonia's arm, but Rolonia stopped her hand.

"It won't be long now, so please wait a bit longer."

Rolonia then continued to remove the antennae and legs. And when the parasite was on the verge of being completely removed, Adlet thought he saw the corpse soldier's mouth move ever so slightly.

And when the parasite was detached, the energy vanished from the soldier's body.

"Water....water...." the soldier rasped.

Rolonia took out a water canteen from her things tied to her waist and poured the liquid into her mouth. When her mouth was full, she poured the liquid from her mouth into the mouth of the corpse soldier.....no, the young boy who used to be a corpse soldier.

Rolonia then took off her armor and exposed her wrists. She set her teeth into the skin around her veins, and blood spilled out from the edge of her mouth.

"Rolonia-san, what are you..."

The blood splashed down onto the young boy's body, and all the parts of his dry, rotting body where her blood soaked into were returned to life.

"This is the first stage of his treatment. Soon he should wake up," Rolonia said.

But the young boy's eyes never opened. Rolonia desperately placed her hand onto his chest around his heart and started to blow air into his mouth. Adlet watched silently from the side with a face that seemed to indicate he thought she was wasting her time.

"He's done for, Rolonia. Let's go!"

"No, no. Wait a little longer."

"We made our decision! We agreed not to help the corpse soldiers!"

"Well at the moment I can't listen to what you're saying, Ad-kun!"

Adlet grabbed Rolonia's arm and forcibly pulled her to her feet, but Rolonia shook off his hand and glared at him.

"Follow us!"

Rolonia slung the fallen corpse soldier over her shoulder and followed Adlet and the others. Unexpectedly, she seemed to have strong legs and wasn't struggling at all in spite of running with a person on her shoulder.

"We're going to fight again after this, so put that person down," Adlet said.

"I said it before. Right now, I'm not listening to anything you say, Ad-kun," Rolonia shot back.

Getting annoyed, Adlet's words became more aggressive. "You can't help them. No matter how you look at it, it's useless."

"It's not useless. I removed the parasite and his heart is moving. If I can give him sufficient treatment, then I can save him."

You're an idiot, Adlet thought.

"If you can give him sufficient treatment? Where's the time for that? We have to defeat Number 9 and head to the Temple of Fate. Once there, we have to locate the Black Barren Flower. Where's the time to give him sufficient treatment?"

"Umm..." Rolonia hesitated.

Meanwhile, Nashetania silently watched the two of them argue.

"In this place, you and Mora are the only ones who can heal people. And you can't make any tools that can heal in your place. So saving all of the corpse soldiers is simply not possible."

Rolonia said nothing in response.

"And let's say you do save them all. What will you do after that? Will you throw them into the Wailing Demon territory without any means of defending themselves? Wouldn't you just be waiting for them to get killed and eaten by the Kyoma?!"

Rolonia was silent, but her eyes clearly showed that her resolve hadn't wavered at all. Her silence said that she wasn't listening to anything Adlet was saying.

Rolonia had always followed closely behind Adlet, and when she fought she did so nervously. She loyally followed all of Adlet's directions, even though sometimes he'd wished that she would offer her own opinion a bit more.

Until now, he had never even thought of the possibility that she would ever openly oppose him. Until now, he had never believed that he wouldn't be able to reason with her.

Adlet couldn't understand Rolonia. He didn't get why she would risk danger just to help a corpse soldier who didn't have any connection to her. Even though she should have feared causing trouble for those around her above all else, for some reason, she was suddenly behaving selfishly.

"...Rolonia, you...

You're not hiding something, are you? Adlet wondered. It was the first time suspicion towards her sprouted within his mind.

The three of them reunited with the others. Goldof was repeating his charge again and again in an attempt to break through the enemy ranks, while Chamo's Jyuma and Dozzu's electricity provided support. However, the enemy didn't seem to be running to the south like the Heroes wanted.

"Let's move. We'll attack from the northeast and drive the enemy to the south."

Nashetania nodded in agreement, and Rolonia followed with the former corpse soldier on her back.

After moving to the northeast, Adlet threw the bomb he'd received from Fremy as hard as he could in an attempt to break up the enemy forces. The corpse soldiers swarmed the explosive, bravely sacrificing their bodies to protect the defenseless Dark Specialist. At the same time, Nashetania conjured up blades from the ground and aimed them at the Kyoma.

Attacked from two sides, the Dark Specialist made an especially loud sound and as one the pack of corpse soldiers moved south.

#

The five humans and Dozzu regrouped and continued their pursuit of Number 9. As they ran, Dozzu moved close to Adlet and started to talk to him.

"It seems like your strategy was correct, Adlet-san."

"What the hell are you talking about? Don't you know you're talking to the strongest man in the world?"

Even if Fremy were at their current location, it would probably be difficult to eliminate the Dark Specialist. Cautious about being sniped by Fremy, Number 9 had most likely strengthened and reinforced his force's ranks about him. *Who knows how many hours it would have taken to kill him that way.*

As Dozzu and Adlet ran, corpse soldiers came at them from both sides. Dozzu used his electricity and Adlet his paralyzing darts to take out the corpse soldiers.

"And there is another thing. What is Rolonia-san hiding?"

Dozzu's question caught Adlet off guard. Dozzu was having doubts about Rolonia in the same way that he was.

"I cannot understand why she would be that obsessed over the corpse soldiers. Does she have some kind of secret?"

"Like how Mora betrayed us, or how Goldof went over to Nashetania's side?"

"I am not saying that, but..."

Adlet and Dozzu provided support as Goldof once again charged into the enemy. At the moment Goldof was at the center of the fight, and the force of his charge was driving the Dark Specialist in their desired direction.

"Originally, Rolonia was just a cleaning maid. Then she unexpectedly became the Saint of Fresh Blood and was used by Mora. That should be all there is to her. She shouldn't have any kind of secret."

"So then, why?"

Adlet didn't know either. And now, as she was fighting, Rolonia still had the young man on her back.

"Is it alright for things to be like this?"

"There's no way it could be. But there's no need to keep complaining about it. Just leave it to me. "

"Understood. I am just somewhat uneasy."

The number of corpse soldiers attacking the Flowers as they chased after Number 9 was gradually decreasing. So, leaving the fighting to Nashetania and Chamo's Jyuma, the other Heroes came to a stop. Then Dozzu approached Rolonia, who had been bringing up the rear of the group.

"Did you succeed in removing the parasite...? I am shocked," Dozzu said as he watched her carry the young man on her back.

"He's weak, but he doesn't have any major injuries. After this, I'll just revitalize him with some energy. Dozzu-san, you—you kept saying it wasn't possible, but it is."

"No. Unfortunately, Rolonia-san, he is already..." Dozzu stopped and shook his head from side to side.

Rolonia looked at the young man on her back. "...Huh?"

She placed her hand on the young man's neck. Then she hung her head and lowered his body to the ground. Without having to ask, it was clear that something had happened.

"Wh-why? How...?"

Dozzu spoke quietly. "His mind was already gone. Though you were able to revive the body, you could not bring back his mind. Rolonia-san, you are a saint who possesses exceptional power, but this is something that just can't be helped."

"There's no way to....revive the mind?"

"At least I do not know of one."

Rolonia said nothing back. She just stood there hanging her head. There was a clear sense of distrust in Dozzu's eyes as he looked at her, and even Chamo and Nashetania cast similar looks in her direction. Chamo was looking at Rolonia scornfully, as if she was useless, and it looked like Nashetania was thinking about something.

This is bad, Adlet thought. They're starting to suspect Rolonia.

"Let's fight. We still have to end this," Adlet said, and the entire group broke out into a dash.

But Rolonia quietly muttered, "There must still be a way.... There...has to be."

The five humans and the Kyoma resumed their charge, and the battle with the corpse soldiers raged on.

#

"They're strong, they're strong..... They're so strong!" Dark Specialist Number 9 said as the corpse soldiers died in front of him.

He was trembling with delight. Five of the Heroes and their Kyoma companion were fighting the corpse soldiers right before his eyes.

His task was to prevent the Heroes from entering the Fainting Mountains area until the main force Tgurneu commanded reached their location. There were other Kyoma defending the Fainting Mountains, but Number 9 had been tasked with the most important position.

The Dark Specialist didn't know if there was something hidden at the Fainting Mountains, and of course he didn't know who Tgurneu had sent to infiltrate the Flowers as an imposter. *There was probably no reason for me to know*, Number 9 thought.

"Shit, I can't get close!" Goldof shouted.

His goal was clear. He was trying to kill Number 9 and render the corpse soldiers powerless. However, with the thick wall of corpse soldiers blocking his way, Goldof couldn't get close to the Kyoma.

Chamo's Jyuma were trying to break up the ranks of the corpse soldiers. And though they were gradually pushing into the corpse soldiers, they weren't able to reach Number 9 either. Goldof and Dozzu were launching attacks at the Kyoma again and again, but Number 9 ordered the corpse soldiers to sacrifice themselves by blocking the attacks with their bodies. If he had just five corpse soldiers as shields, then the Dark Specialist could stop any kind of attack.

Historically, it was probably the first time that a single Kyoma had ever succeeded in stopping all of the Heroes of the Six Flowers.

Even the Demon King Zophrair couldn't do it, and he had commanded several dozen Kyoma. And even when Cargikk, Tgurneu, and Dozzu joined forces in the past, it took everything they had to stop Hayuha and the other two Heroes she was with for just a moment. The enemy he was facing now included the Heroes, Dozzu, and Dozzu's subordinate.

The Dark Specialist Number 9 was drunk on the power he had acquired. He was glad that he'd left Cargikk's side and joined Tgurneu, who had given him new powers and ordered him to change his body in a certain way. It was precisely because of those orders that he had become so strong.

"Back them up! Dozzu! Go!" Adlet shouted as he threw some smoke bombs, obscuring the vision of both the Dark Specialist and the corpse soldiers.

Dark Specialist Number 9 smiled as if this wasn't a problem. The corpse soldiers lifted him onto their backs and ran in the opposite direction of the charging Dozzu. Goldof and Dozzu's companions were also attacking them from the side, but the corpse soldiers were able to block the attacks with their own bodies.

"Run! Adlet, follow him!" Chamo shouted.

Adlet chased after Number 9; however, as the weakest of the enemies, his attacks of course wouldn't be a problem.

The Dark Specialist continued to escape with the help of his corpse soldiers. If they were to stop at all, then they would all be wiped out.

However, there were a number of corpse soldiers, and if the ones around the Dark Specialist were cut down, all he had to do was call the others from the center of the forest.

Number 9 analyzed the current situation. There were a hundred corpse soldiers guarding the road that continued to the Fainting Mountains, and they were never going to move. There were also about two hundred and five corpse soldiers that had been stranded on the north side of the forest. It was quite a serious blow to their forces, but it wasn't a fatal loss.

Of the remaining six hundred and fifty corpse soldiers, three hundred of them were prowling about at the center of the forest. If Number 9 were to call out to all the corpse soldiers, then Adlet and the others would be completely surrounded. But the Dark Specialist preferred not to do that. There was a possibility that the Flowers he couldn't see—Hans, Mora, and Fremy—would charge into the forest while Adlet and his group were distracting him.

While running, the Dark Specialist thought, *If this strategy is successful, I'll definitely be given the highest honor. Tgurneu will give me my own name, instead of just a number.*

Before, when that filthy, unseemly human child had been given that honor, Number 9 had shaken with hatred and rage.

No, that isn't right. With my power, I might receive something even greater than that. I could surpass Tgurneu and Cargikk and come to command all of the Kyoma.

*The Majin could directly appoint me to the position of Demon King, and then I could name **myself**.*

He would have never stood a chance against Tgurneu, Cargikk, or their so-called equal Dozzu in the past.

But, bit by bit, a change had taken place within Number 9's mind. It was slowly budding desires and a will in the same way that Tgurneu's, Cargikk's, and Dozzu's had. Within his heart was the desire to rule, and he had started to seek the pleasant feeling of manipulating others as he wished.

Chapter Four: Part Three

What in the world is going on....?

Raina was prowling about the center of the forest, searching for anything that moved. And whenever he found something, he would shriek and attack. But he wasn't fighting the Heroes of the Six Flowers. His opponents were dozens of mysterious Kyoma—lizards, snakes, leeches, and frogs. Scores of giant Kyoma were attacking the corpse soldiers.

The Kyoma were no match for the mass of corpse soldiers. They were quickly surrounded and killed; but then the mysterious Kyoma would strangely change into a mud-like substance, which would revert back into the form of the Kyoma after a few seconds.

So the corpse soldiers fought and killed them, then fought them again and killed them once more. They were stuck in that continuous loop, and Raina couldn't reach out to the Six Flowers, nor could he meet up with them, or do anything other than fight and kill.

If things continue like this....

His once-blossoming hope was suddenly withering away.

It seemed like the sounds of the Six Flowers fighting—electricity and explosions—were already very far away. To make matters worse, there weren't any signs that any other Heroes were approaching the center of the forest.

And the Kyoma that Raina was fighting against had no intelligence, so they didn't notice the writing on his arm.

Before Raina's eyes, one of the water snake Kyoma restored itself from its mud-like state. A scream left Raina's mouth, and the corpse soldiers around him all pounced on the Kyoma at once. Raina's body was forced to fight too.

Then a sense of fatigue came over his left arm. It was a sign that he was about to regain control over the appendage, making it the third time today.

If these Kyoma are the allies of the Flowers...

Raina desperately took out the sharpened fragment of rock from his tattered pants' pocket. It was the same stone he had used to carve on both his arms and the arms of the other corpse soldiers.

With the stone in hand, Raina's body was forced to charge at the water snake Kyoma, and his right arm grabbed the body of the water snake and stopped it from moving. But at the same time, Raina freely extended his left arm and stabbed the tip of the stone into the Kyoma's body.

He then started to carve into the water snake's body. His goal was to write, "Help me, I'm alive." However, before he could finish even a single word, the water snake twisted its body and freed itself from Raina's hold.

Then the water snake whipped its tail and grazed Raina's stomach. It was an attack of intense force that should have made him scream in agony. However, the parasite in Raina's body forced his body to continue moving regardless of the extreme pain.

This isn't good. I'll be killed, not to mention that I can't write anything.

A numbness started to run through his left arm, so Raina hastily stashed his only tool back into his pocket.

Raina knew that what he was doing was a terrible way to go about things, but he couldn't think of any other way.

If I continue to fight like this....what will happen? he wondered.

It was unimaginable that the Six Flowers would lose here. They were the strongest six people in the world. No matter how many corpse soldiers there were, taking out Number 9 would probably only be a matter of time for them.

But what if the fight ends? What will happen to me if the Kyoma controlling the corpse soldiers dies?

If Number 9 died and the corpse soldiers returned to being human, that would be good. And even if they remained corpse soldiers, there would still be hope of the Flowers maybe finding him. But what if Number 9 died and the corpse soldiers died as well?

He was almost out of time.

Perhaps the Flowers still hadn't realized that there was someone still alive among the corpse soldiers who knew about Tgurneu's secret weapon. Perhaps the Flowers hadn't seen any of the five corpse soldiers he had carved words into.

No, there's no way that could be true. They will definitely find them.

#

But Raina didn't know that Number 9 and the Six Flowers had already left the area around the giant tree, and the center of the forest had fallen silent. The only things still there were the corpses of about twenty corpse soldiers.

One of the corpses had been entirely roasted by Dozzu, its body twisted in pain. Around its left wrist, some words could faintly be seen. "...something..."

That corpse was one of the soldiers that Raina had carved into to convey to the Flowers that he was alive.

"There is a man with words on his right arm. He knows something important." The rest of those words had been burned by Dozzu's attack.

One of Raina's rays of hope had been completely wasted without ever giving its message to a single person. What's more, at the valley at the edge of the forest, there was another of his chosen corpse soldiers wandering about the north edge. It had followed Hans and crossed the valley, and, with the bridge destroyed, could no longer return back to the forest. All of the Six Flowers were at the south side. So probably none of them were aware of the corpse soldier at the north.

The words, *"A man with words written on his right arm is alive, Find them. They are big, have a scar on their face, and know Tgurneu's secret weapon,"* were written on its left arm. But that corpse soldier would never cross paths with the Heroes.

And on the road that continued onto the Temple of Fate after exiting the forest, there were about a hundred corpse soldiers assembled into a war camp. They had been ordered to kill everything that approached the temple.

One of the corpse soldiers among them had writing on its arm that read, *"The man with writing on his right arm knows something important."*

Until the Six Flowers defeated Number 9, they did not intend on heading to the Temple of Fate. So none of them would ever read the words carved into its left arm.

#

The charge to drive Dark Specialist Number 9 into their trap continued, with the Five Heroes and Dozzu slicing non-stop towards the Kyoma. And as the Heroes advanced, Number 9 got a bit scared and chose to escape to the south. For close to an hour the Heroes, corpse soldiers, and the Dark Specialist had been caught in that same cycle. Charge, attack, retreat.

Rolonia was following behind the others as they chased Number 9.

"That shithead is running again!" Adlet shouted.

"Goldof, can't you cut deeper into their ranks!?" Nashetania yelled.

While they fought, it was completely forbidden to say anything that might insinuate that there were others hiding in wait for the Dark Specialist. If Number 9 became aware of Mora and Fremy's presence, then everything that the Heroes had done would be for nothing.

"...Uh, what should we do?" Rolonia muttered.

If they were to continue fighting as they were, then perhaps Number 9 would be defeated. But at the same time, all the corpse soldiers would also perish, and that was not acceptable. Rolonia wanted to help the corpse soldiers at all costs.

But she also knew that there was no time. She lacked the tools and the people to help her. Also, she hadn't been able to even come up with a method to help the corpses. In her current condition, there was absolutely nothing she could do.

Rolonia wanted information. She wanted someone to tell her a way to save the corpse soldiers, no matter how faint the possibility happened to be.

Then two corpse soldiers that had been circling the center of the forest attacked the group from behind. At the back of the group, Rolonia desperately swung her whip to fight them off.

"I'm sorry!" Rolonia shouted.

It wasn't a situation where she could take it easy on her enemies, and Rolonia had no tool to render them powerless without killing them. So, trembling with guilt, Rolonia swung her whip. The tip of her whip missed, but the center made contact with one of the soldiers right around his heart.

The corpse soldier screamed as a geyser of blood spurted out from its body. But another corpse soldier rushed forward and tackled Rolonia to the ground without caring at all about its comrade. Though pinned to the ground, Rolonia managed to move her whip. The tip struck the soldier's back, spilling its blood across the forest floor.

But the next moment, the corpse soldier's mouth moved.

"Please...help....us...."

"Huh?"

"Help....in cave...."

Still lying on the ground, Rolonia stared at the corpse soldier, dumbfounded. Then she quickly snapped back to her senses and started to perform first-aid to keep the corpse soldier alive. But Rolonia's attack had killed him.

"That... That...."

"What the hell are you doing, you stupid cow!" Chamo shouted, kicking Rolonia's leg while she was on the ground.

"Chamo-san, just now, the corpse soldier talked."

"Yeah right, in your dreams! Stupid cow. Make a bit of an effort and fight!"

Even more corpse soldiers were approaching them from behind. Rolonia desperately swung her whip and repelled them. As she did so, she strained her ears and listened to the corpse soldiers.

I'm sure it just talked. And it said to help them. So the corpse soldiers are alive after all. And they've been trying to tell us something.

Rolonia watched as a Jyuma took down one of the corpse soldiers. That corpse soldier looked directly at Rolonia and pointed in some direction.

"Cave..."

Rolonia rushed over to the fallen soldier.

"What's going on? What is over there?"

"In the cave.... Hidden woman.... Help us...."

Before the corpse soldier was finished saying everything, it screamed. Rolonia looked in the direction it had pointed. It was a point a little south of the road that continued to the Temple of Fate. Whatever may have been there, she couldn't see it from where she was.

#

"Stop for a moment," Adlet said between ragged breaths.

Naturally, he was a little tired. Dozzu came to a stop beside him, and both Goldof and Nashetania stopped their charge.

Only the Jyuma, which didn't know exhaustion, were still fighting the herd of corpses.

They were already close to the south hill where Fremy and Mora lay in wait. If they could fight for just fifteen minutes more, then they could probably drive the Dark Specialist into position. And when Number 9 was defeated, then, at last, they could head straight for The Temple of Fate.

Their objective was the truth about the Black Barren Flower, so they couldn't waste a lot of time in the forest. So after they took a moment to regain their breaths, they continued the fight. But right as they were about to move, Rolonia said something from behind.

"Ad-kun, everyone, did you hear someone?" Rolonia asked everyone.

What is it this time? Adlet thought. "What did you hear?" he asked.

"They talked. The corpse soldier asked us to help it. And it said for us to head to the cave over there... Did any of you hear anything?"

Adlet didn't know. Rolonia exchanged glances with the others, but none of them said a word either.

"If we go there, we might figure out something. Everyone, I'm sorry, but I'm going to go and see."

Rolonia was about to run off when Adlet stopped her.

"Stop. It's a trap. Didn't I say it before? Tgurneu is trying to get us to do this in order to waste time!"

"Rolonia-san, it is dangerous...and it seems pointless," Dozzu said.

"Do you think they would say something meaningless when they're moments away from dying? No, there is definitely something at the cave," Rolonia said back to Dozzu.

"Please, Rolonia. Stop this already," Adlet said to her quietly.

He wasn't able to put up with Rolonia's fixation with the corpse soldiers any longer.

"Please. Don't make this more confusing."

"...Ad-kun."

Rolonia stared at Adlet. Suddenly, a rapier was thrust right between the two of them.

"That's far enough, Rolonia-san." Nashetania was looking at Rolonia with a cold stare. "I see through your plan."

Rolonia's eyes grew wide.

What is she planning on doing? Adlet wondered.

"What are you doing, princess? Don't you want to attack the enemy?" Chamo asked.

"Let's wait a little bit on the charge. There shouldn't be any problem if the enemy doesn't move. What's more important right now is discussing Rolonia-san's true identity."

"What are you talking about, Nashetania?" Adlet tried to grab Nashetania's wrist, but she smoothly twisted out of his grip and took a step backwards.

"I'm talking about how it has become more evident that Rolonia is probably the seventh."

A long silence passed among the group. Adlet was completely still, his hand resting on the hilt of his sword. It was as if to say to Goldof that if she were planning on putting the companions into a trap, then he would kill her on the spot.

"Adlet-san, you trust your companions too much. Didn't Dozzu say that the seventh's attack had already begun? Actually, it's quite simple. If you could see things objectively then you'd understand immediately."

Nashetania was trying to appeal to Adlet as if what she was doing was for his benefit.

"She will continue to conceal her identity and kill all of us. The most simple and logical way to do that is to purposefully make a mistake. That way it would be acceptable if we died. But if we didn't, she could just list some excuses and wait for her next opportunity. Don't you think that's what's going on here?" Nashetania stared right at Adlet.

"Has Rolonia-san really been useful? Adlet-san, haven't you been covering for her mistakes over and again?"

That's not true, Adlet tried to say. But as they'd advanced through the Forest of Severed Fingers, she had been spotted by the Kyoma multiple times. However, that was because she was bad at being secretive. There was no way that she had purposefully tried to be found.

"Rolonia helped Hans," Adlet replied.

"She only did that to gain your trust."

That's a stretch, Adlet thought. What does she intend to gain from saying stuff like this?

"Don't talk without any kind of proof, or there will be consequences," Adlet said.

"Do you really think I'd be saying any of this without proof?"

Nashetania approached Rolonia. At the same time, Goldof grabbed both of Rolonia's hands.

As Rolonia twisted in his grasp, Goldof reached for her shoulder and ripped off something from between the cracks of her armor.

It was the small fragment of wood that Nashetania had spotted earlier.

"I see. So that's what it was," she muttered.

Goldof let go of Rolonia and stepped back.

"What is this?" Nashetania asked, showing Rolonia the small fragment of wood.

"...I don't know. What is that?"

With just a single glance, Adlet knew what it was. It was a Kyoma summoning flute. It released a sound that couldn't be heard by humans, but it could send a signal to all the Kyoma in the area.

Adlet also had something similar, but this flute with its multitude of holes seemed far more sophisticated than the one Atro had made.

"It is a flute to draw the Kyoma. Why do you have such a thing?"

"...That.....that isn't mine. I don't know what that is. I've never seen it before!"
Rolonia was starting to get flustered.

"When we first charged at the enemy, you were excessively concerned about Dozzu. When Dozzu separated from us, you tried to take out something from your shoulder, but stopped when you noticed I was looking. I thought you might be hiding something. So now I've checked, and what do you know, I was exactly right."

"I don't know anything. Please stop!"

"Nashetania. If you don't want to die then be quiet," Adlet said.

Allowing his anger to take hold of him, Adlet started to draw his sword. Nashetania was trying to frame Rolonia. He thought about sending Fremy the signal to trigger the explosives on both of Nashetania's knees.

"Why do I have to be quiet? I'm saying this for the benefit of the Six Flowers."

Nashetania faced Adlet as he drew his sword.

"The candidates for the seventh have already been narrowed down. Rolonia-san, Fremy-san, and you are the ones with comparably high possibilities of being the impostor."



"And if there is information about the Black Barren Flower at our destination, it is highly likely that the seventh will make a move in order to try and hinder our actions."

"..."

"Are you still going to make excuses for her even after what you've seen and heard? Do you think you can overlook this, even if the evidence isn't definitive?"

"You are our enemy. All it seems like you're doing is trying to set Rolonia up."

"There are bombs attached to my knees. And I am surrounded by the Six Flowers. If you were me, would you think about trying to set up a trap in a situation like this?"

"That may be so, but there's no way that we can trust anything you say."

"Chamo wonders if that's true," Chamo said. "Nashetania can't be trusted, but Chamo also doubts what you're saying, Adlet. If there were absolutely no evidence that she's the seventh, then Chamo would definitely believe you."

"I'm not saying that, but I..."

"Chamo has wondered a lot, why is this stupid cow getting in our way?"

"...getting in the way..."

"Adlet, should I hunt down Rolonia, or kill the princess?"

With a wide grin on her face, Chamo placed her foxtail grass to her mouth. There were still a number of Jyuma within her stomach.

"Chamo-san. I don't think we should kill Rolonia-san immediately. This flute still might not be hers. It's possible that the seventh planted it without her knowledge."

"Maybe, but..." Chamo said.

"What in the world are you saying? What is the meaning of this, Nashetania?"

Dozzu was getting flustered, and at least to Adlet, it didn't seem like he was acting. And Dozzu and Nashetania shouldn't have had any time to conspire together, so this couldn't have been Dozzu's plan.

"I'm just saying what I've seen. I'm not plotting anything, Dozzu."

Nashetania looked back to Adlet. "As Chamo-san said, we can't definitively say that Rolonia-san is the enemy, but there is a chance that she is planning to stop us. Or she might have some trap for us in that cave to kill all of us. There's no way that we can let her go."

"But, the corpse soldiers definitely said it," Rolonia interjected. "They said go to the cave. They wanted us to help them!"

Adlet was shocked. She was placing her thoughts about the corpse soldiers ahead of her concern for herself. *Why?* Adlet wondered. *She can't really be hiding something, right?*

At that moment Adlet was taken aback. He was starting to trust Nashetania's words more than Rolonia. He found that unacceptable. However, once suspicion had sprouted inside of him, it wouldn't disappear no matter how many times he denied it.

Nevertheless, Adlet placed his hand on Rolonia's shoulder and spoke. "Don't worry. I don't know what Nashetania is planning, but you're friend to the strongest man in the world. I won't let you die."

"....Thank you."

From the way she said those words, Adlet sensed that she still hadn't changed her mind about the soldiers.

"Do you still plan on going to that cave?"

She didn't say anything, but not answering was the same as admitting it to be true.

"What are you thinking? Don't you get the situation we're in? Nashetania is setting you up. She's trying to frame you."

"But, we have to go quickly. Our chance to help the corpse soldiers might disappear."

"That's enough about the corpse soldiers! Didn't I say it?! Those words, the speaking corpse soldier—all of it is a part of Tgurneu's strategy!"

Adlet simply couldn't understand what Rolonia was thinking. The flute wasn't the only reason he was suspicious. It was also because she was trying to help the corpse soldiers, even though there was no way to actually do so. There had to be a reason behind her incomprehensible behavior.

"Naturally, Chamo can't let you freely go off somewhere," Chamo pressed Rolonia.

"I concur. I apologize, but it is necessary to restrict your movements, Rolonia-san," Nashetania said.

"Hey, you stupid cow. Hand Chamo your whip," Chamo said, sticking out her hand.

Rolonia looked at her with eyes full of fear. That whip was her only weapon.

"Until suspicions surrounding you have been cleared up, Chamo will hold onto it. But don't worry, you won't need it. After all, you've been useless for a while now."

"But, but this is..."

"Chamo said she'll give it back when everything has been cleared up, but you still aren't handing it over. Why is that?" Chamo continued to move closer to Rolonia while twirling the fox-tail grass by her mouth. Rolonia backed up in response.

"Without my whip, I can't fight."

"Chamo is saying not to fight. You really have no choice but to give it to Chamo."

Chamo then stuck the grass down her throat. At the same time, Adlet moved to defend Rolonia. The Jyuma Chamo spat out lurched towards Rolonia, and Adlet stopped their attacks with his sword.

"Stop it, Chamo!"

"Chamo doesn't plan on killing her. Chamo is just going to make it so she can't go anywhere!"

Adlet blocked each of the attacks that came from Chamo's Jyuma one by one. He could tell that Chamo wasn't trying to kill Rolonia or him, but he still had no choice but to protect Rolonia.

"Rolonia, if you don't want to pit us all against one another, then give up your whip."

"I...I can't."

Goldof came to grab Adlet, but Adlet kicked him in the side. However, that left an opening in his defenses, and one of the Jyuma rushed past Adlet and barreled towards Rolonia. In order to keep hold of her whip, Rolonia was forced to defend herself against the Jyuma.

"You're being stupid, Rolonia. If you'd just go along with this you wouldn't get hurt."

"But..."

Despite being so close to the enemy, the companions continued to fight amongst themselves. Nashetania, the ringleader of all the commotion, simply watched from the sidelines.

"Wait a second. This is bad. The Dark Specialist has started to move," Dozzu said.

For a long time the corpse soldiers had been heading towards the mountains to the south, as Adlet and the others had intended. But, as if they had sensed that something was wrong, they seemed to have changed course and were now coming right towards them.

"There's nothing we can do. We have to fight back!" Adlet stood at the head of the group and faced the corpse soldiers.

"Well, Chamo guesses we have no choice. So we'll postpone things with Rolonia till later," Chamo replied.

The Jyuma that were attacking Rolonia changed their targets to the corpse soldiers.

The battle grew fiercer than ever before. Before, they had simply chased the enemy as they ran, but now the soldiers were coming right for them. They had to fight off these corpses while simultaneously forcing them and the Dark Specialist towards the southern mountain where Fremy and Mora were waiting.

What's happening? Adlet thought as he fought. *What should I do?*

Is Nashetania trying to deceive us? Or did she really discover that there was a chance that Rolonia was the seventh, and was just trying to tell the group? Both possibilities seemed likely, so Adlet couldn't come to a conclusion.

Is Rolonia still just trying to help the corpse soldiers? Or is she really trying to set a trap for the Six Flowers? Adlet didn't know the answer to that either. He had no idea why Rolonia was helping the corpse soldiers so much.

Rolonia was a kind girl. It was natural that she would think to help the corpse soldiers, but why was she risking her life to do so? As he fought with the corpse soldiers, those questions continued to confuse him.

Adlet used a massive amount of bombs, and Goldof charged through the corpse soldier ranks, cutting them to pieces. It eventually stopped the corpse soldiers' charge, and they started to retreat.

But then Nashetania shouted, "Rolonia-san isn't here!"

Adlet turned around, but Rolonia, who just a moment ago had been fighting right behind him, was nowhere to be found.

No way. Could she have really headed to the cave to help the corpse soldiers?

"Were you not watching her, Chamo-san?!" Nashetania yelled.

"Chamo wasn't. What were you and Goldof doing?!"

Nashetania and Chamo argued as Goldof puzzled over whether to chase after Rolonia or not.

"What a pain. Now Chamo might not stop at just hurting her," Chamo muttered.

And with that, the suspicions the group had about Rolonia deepened.

"What are you doing, Rolonia?" Adlet wondered.

Even if there were words written on the corpse soldiers, and even if it were true that the corpse soldiers had spoken, he was sure that all of it was just a trap Nashetania had set. And if things continued as they were, Rolonia would probably be killed.

I have to protect her. However, how in the world am I supposed to do that?

"....Rolonia, are you really....?"

Adlet desperately tried to contain the doubt that was forming within his mind.

#

It seems the attack has started, thought Dark Specialist Number 9. The reason he dared to go on the offensive wasn't to kill the Heroes of the Six Flowers. It was to get close to the Six Flowers and figure out the current situation. *I wonder if any of them set a trap*, the Dark Specialist thought as the Flowers started to talk among themselves and a quarrel broke out among them.

As he listened to their conversation, his confidence in that idea was changing.

Number 9 thought back to the past about ten years ago.

For a long time, as Tgurneu's subordinate, Dark Specialist Number 9 had forced his body to evolve. He used the large amount of humans gathered by Tgurneu as lab rats and succeeded in turning them into corpse soldiers.

When he showed the corpse soldiers to Tgurneu, for some reason Tgurneu seemed displeased. Even though Number 9 had absolute confidence in the corpse soldiers he had produced, for Tgurneu, it was hard to believe in them.

"This is a bit unsatisfactory. Hey, these so-called corpse soldiers, can they not speak?"

Number 9 nodded. The corpse soldiers were fighting weapons. There was no need for them to be able to speak.

"Then you can't call this complete. Your order was to make it so that they would be able to talk..."

Tgurneu touched his hand to his chin in thought.

"I see. Well, I'd like you to make just a few corpse soldiers that can move on their own without your commands."

"What purpose could that..."

"Don't ask stupid questions. Believe in me, Number 9," Tgurneu said with a smile.

The Dark Specialist was shocked by Tgurneu's perceptiveness. It was something Number 9 wouldn't have been able to come up with even if he'd racked his brain for a thousand years.

Tgurneu had predicted that someone among the Flowers would try to help the corpse soldiers. And he had also predicted that, if the corpse soldiers were used effectively, they would invite the Six Flowers into a trap which could wipe out all of them.

At first it had seemed unlikely. Humans were foolish creatures, but he had never thought there would be a human so idiotic that they would want to help the corpse soldiers.

And he had never even imagined that such a foolish person would separate from the rest of the Heroes and go off on their own in order to help the corpse soldiers.

The Kyoma emitted a special sound wave and called out to the corpse soldiers in the center of the forest. *Lead Rolonia Manchester to the cave in the forest.* With that command in mind, one by one he instructed the corpse soldiers on what to say.

Whether Rolonia was a genuine Hero of the Six Flowers or an imposter, Number 9 didn't know. But there was probably no way that Tgurneu would have a fool such as her working for him.

I will kill her quickly, Number 9 decided.

#

At the same time, Mora was lying in wait at the center of the small mountain. She was using her second sight to oversee the entire area, but she couldn't see any corpse soldiers approaching, nor the Kyoma. The mountain had fallen silent.

"They're still not here," Mora muttered.

"They aren't late," Fremy replied in a cool tone. "This is the amount of time it should take. Calm down and wait."

Fremy had said that the most important point when it came to sniping was not to rush. But while Fremy had probably experienced this many times, Mora was unfamiliar with the waiting and couldn't hide her irritation.

The seventh, Dozzu, Nashetania, Tgurneu—there were a number of factors to be uneasy about. And on top of that, Mora was worried about Adlet and Rolonia. The two of them were far too concerned with the corpse soldiers.

It would be far better if they'd just treat the corpse soldiers coldly and not take any strange actions towards them, Mora thought, without any idea what would happen to her companions from here on out.

All she could do was continue to wait.

#

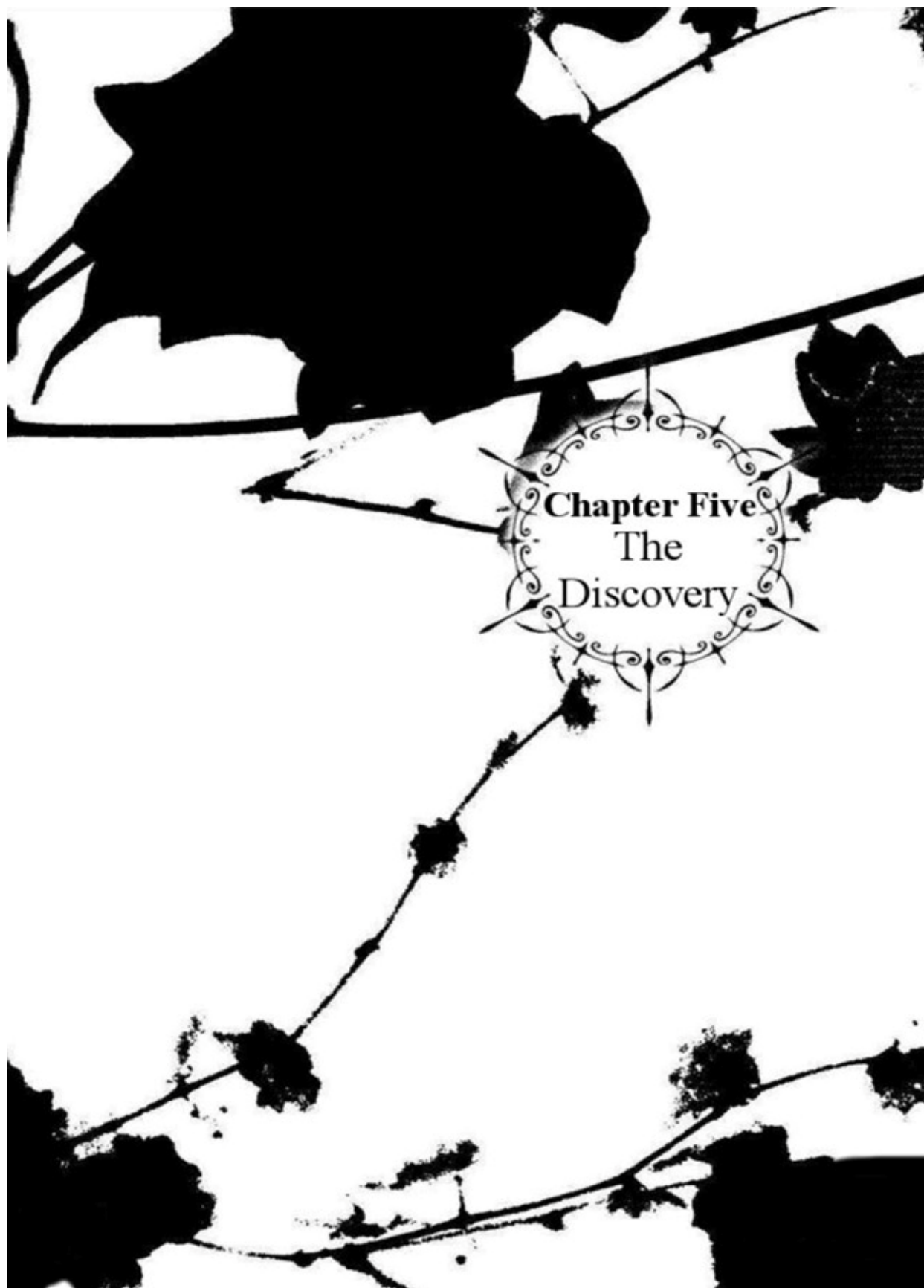
Thirty minutes before Rolonia had gone off on her own, Hans was quietly standing atop a tree at the north side of the forest. Beneath his feet the corpse soldiers were moving about in every direction.

A wire had been run around the forest. Each time the corpse soldiers stepped on it, a wood alarm would be triggered. And each time the wood alarm made a noise, the corpse soldiers would go crazy in search of the enemy.

Hans had made nothing more than simple clappers, but the corpse soldiers lacked the intelligence to see through the obvious trap and realize that the sounds were meaningless.

He smiled widely and ran along the branches without making a single sound.





Chapter Five: Part One

Despite the many corpse soldiers the Heroes had already killed, many more of their brethren still roamed about all over the forest. Rolonia desperately strained her ears to listen for their footsteps, and only when she found a place where there were few enemies did she start to run again.

In the distance behind her she could hear corpse soldiers shrieking, followed by the sound of Dozzu firing electricity.

"...Everyone is fighting."

For a moment Rolonia felt like she should return and help them, but she soon reconsidered. If she were to return now, she would be killed. She had been framed by Nashetania, and now Dozzu, Chamo, and Goldof suspected her. Plus, she herself hadn't helped matters by running off alone.

Why is this happening? Rolonia wondered.

I have to return, but I don't know what I should do. I can't seem to think of any way to clear up their doubts.

Just several hours earlier, when they had been in the small hut, she had inspected her equipment and there hadn't been anything like that flute Nashetania had found. She must have planted it after that.

But Rolonia had been cautious of Nashetania the entire time they had been together; she would have known immediately if Nashetania got close to her. Quite simply, Nashetania wouldn't have had any opportunity to plant the flute on Rolonia's shoulder.

So if it wasn't Nashetania, then who was it? Goldof? Dozzu? The seventh? Rolonia racked her brain, but couldn't come up with an answer.

"...Ad-kun, sorry."

Once again I've caused trouble for everyone. I'm stupid, that's why I was able to fall into a trap like this. But feeling sorry won't make me any smarter.

As she ran, she recalled Adlet's face. Back then, when Nashetania had accused her, even he had started to doubt her. And that was more painful than anything else.

Rolonia continued onward, weaving her way through the cracks in the corpse soldiers' defenses and heading towards where the cave should be.

I should put off worrying about myself until later. Right now I have to help the corpse soldiers.

"...It's alright. I'll definitely be able to do it."

She was so scared that her teeth were chattering, and she constantly wondered whether or not she could really do anything. But above all of her hesitation and fear, there was even more anger. She could not allow it to happen. She would not forgive Tgurneu who had made the corpse soldiers, nor could she allow her companions to abandon them.

Whether it had heard Rolonia's mumbling or if it was just by chance, a single corpse soldier noticed Rolonia. Rolonia immediately tried to escape to the side, but the corpse soldier screamed and alerted its fellows.

"Uwaa!"

Corpse soldiers surrounded her on both sides and rushed towards her. Her shoulder gauntlets were able to stop their attacks, but she staggered from their strikes and started to pitch forward. She couldn't withstand their attacks like Goldof could.

Rolonia picked herself up and ran, but as she did another corpse soldier appeared, standing in her way.

If I don't fight, I can't go forward, Rolonia realized, so she gripped her whip with both hands and swung it around.

She tried to shout insults and curses, because if she didn't then she wouldn't be able to fight. But the words wouldn't come. When her opponents were Kyoma she could fight them. But the enemies in front of her were humans.

Rolonia frantically swung her whip and stopped the corpse soldiers' advance, but her movements were slow and were only able to block their attacks.

"Ack!"

As Rolonia tried to move forward, one of the corpse soldiers managed to strike her face. The blow broke her nose and blood started to gush out from her nostrils.

Instantly, her power as the Saint of Fresh Blood activated. Her broken nose started to repair itself, and the bleeding began to slow.

But the corpse soldiers didn't give her the time she needed to heal completely and relentlessly rushed at her one after another.

"I'm sorry!" Rolonia shouted, swinging her whip with all her strength.

The whip weaved its way through the gaps in the trees and knocked down each of the corpse soldiers one by one. She couldn't afford to take it easy on them, which unfortunately meant a number of them were killed.

Rolonia was wracked with guilt, but she continued onwards. There was no time to heal these corpse soldiers. She needed to keep going until she reached the cave, and hopefully she would find something there. Still, Rolonia didn't know if what awaited her would actually help the corpse soldiers.

However, whatever was there *had* to have some sort of importance. The corpse soldiers had definitely said so.

At that moment Rolonia heard the voice of a fallen corpse soldier behind her.

"Please....help...." it rasped, right before it died.

"So it's true, after all," Rolonia muttered.

Some of the corpse soldiers were still alive. Though a parasite had invaded their minds and wrapped itself around the nerves of their necks and spines, there were still some whose minds hadn't yet died.

She then heard a sound come from yet another location. It was another corpse soldier that had been chasing her.

"...Don't...kill....," the corpse soldier moaned as it tried to attack Rolonia.

Rolonia rolled to the side to dodge the attack.

"Please wait! I will definitely save you!" Rolonia shouted. She continued to run towards the cave.

#

For a long time Raina had been wandering about the forest. The voices of the corpse soldiers to the north were dwindling more and more. The area to the south had gone silent for a while, but then once again it erupted with the sounds of fighting.

The Six Flowers.... Why aren't you coming this way? I'm here, Raina thought, just as a lizard Kyoma appeared before his eyes.

A shriek erupted from his mouth, and he along with all the corpse soldiers who flocked to his call were forced to attack the Kyoma.

The lizard Kyoma swung its tail and spat acid at the corpse soldiers. It wasn't fighting to defend itself; it was only focused on taking out the corpse soldiers, even if it only managed to take out one of them.

Again?!

The assembled corpse soldiers held down both of the lizard's arms and legs. Then Raina's body stomped down on its head again and again until the Kyoma became a lump of mud.

So far they had killed a lot of Kyoma, but the words carved into his left arm hadn't been discovered even once. And so neither did the mysterious Kyoma stop fighting, nor did the Six Flowers come looking for him.

So these Kyoma are no good. He had to meet up with the Heroes by any means possible, but Raina didn't have control of his left arm, and the place where the Six Flowers were fighting was extremely far away.

Raina madly tried to think of a way to get close to the Six Flowers. However, with his left arm as his only hope, none of his ideas could be of any use while it wasn't moving.

He had written on the arms of five of the corpse soldiers. *But where are they?* he thought, exasperated. However, it wasn't that strange to think that, since there were so few of them, not even one of them had made contact with the Six Flowers. Perhaps the Six Flowers hadn't discovered the writing at all.

...No way.

A terrifying thought floated into Raina's mind, and a chill ran down his back.

If the Flowers had already discovered the writing on their arms but had chosen to ignore it, then all of Raina's hopes would come to an end.

Would they give up, believing there was no way to help the corpse soldiers? Or would they decide that there was no value in going so far as to risk their lives in order to hear Raina's information? Or, perhaps, would they think that even the writing was one of Tgurneu's traps? Any one of those possibilities would be the end of Raina.

The moment he thought that, a shriek from a nearby corpse soldier pierced the air. There shouldn't have been any of the mysterious Kyoma in the direction it came from. Raina's body reacted to that sound and dashed towards it as fast as his limbs could carry him. All the corpse soldiers in the area followed suit simultaneously.

The number of corpse soldiers heading towards this new sound was far greater than those that were fighting with the Kyoma. They were heading towards the Six Flowers.

Maybe they've come searching for me? Raina thought as his chest swelled with hope.

Did they notice me? No, they don't need to notice me. As long as they read the writing on my right arm...

Before long they spotted a warrior. In between the gaps of the trees, Raina could faintly see a metallic sheen. That warrior was running as fast as they could towards the center of the forest.

As they chased after the warrior, Raina realized that the warrior was a short girl holding a whip. And she was fighting in such a way that she wouldn't kill the corpse soldiers. The warrior with the unkempt hair that he'd seen earlier had cut down any enemy in front of him without hesitation. However, this girl was only using her whip to protect herself and was not inflicting any fatal wounds on the corpse soldiers.

Raina was sure that she was trying to help the corpse soldiers, or at the very least, she was trying not to kill them. If he could show her the words on his arm, she would realize that Raina was alive.

I can see hope! Now, left arm, move now! he desperately wished as his body was forced to run. But his left arm wasn't listening to his pleas.

Then suddenly Raina heard a strange sound. It sounded liked someone was talking to the warrior.

Raina tried to look over the area, but his neck wouldn't move. But there most likely weren't any of the other Flowers around, and the corpse soldiers were definitely not the ones talking.

Again someone said something, but this time Raina could hear it clearly.

"....Help....me..."

The voice came from a corpse soldier. It was one of the corpse soldiers that was chasing the armored girl alongside him.

Why is this corpse soldier talking? Raina was confused. He had thought that, other than himself, all of the corpse soldiers had become living corpses incapable of thought. *Was I wrong?*

He then heard many of the corpse soldiers speak: "We are alive," "Don't kill us", "Go to the cave," "Help us". Though what they were saying was different, the message they were trying to get across was the same. They wanted her to help them, and they wanted her to go to the cave.

When we were lying in the cave, there wasn't a single corpse soldier who had spoken. So why are they now able to talk all of a sudden? Did something happen to Number 9, or did someone do something to make them able to speak again? Raina thought as he chased the armored girl.

But then it all became clear.

Idiot. For crying out loud, I'm such an idiot.

Raina's swelling hope changed to despair in the blink of an eye.

The only reason why the corpse soldiers were talking was that they were being manipulated by a Kyoma.

And from that realization, Raina quickly understand his next question. The reason they were being made to speak was because Dark Specialist Number 9 was trying to lure that armored girl to the cave. And it seemed extremely likely that he planned to kill her there.

...Stop, Six Flowers. There is nothing there!

Raina wasn't just despairing for the girl. He was also thinking about what would happen afterward, if the armored girl realized it was all a trap. The Six Flowers would probably think that the writing Raina had left behind was just another element of the enemy's trap. All of it just fed into Tgurneu's plan.

What should I do? What should I do?

The armored girl was already getting smaller and smaller. She dodged the attacks of the corpse soldiers, then used her whip to lift herself off the ground and climb up a tree. She then ran along the branches and continued deeper into the forest.

And soon Raina could no longer see her.

#

Rolonia had disappeared. Adlet was well aware of that, but there was no way that he could chase after her. They were still fighting to drive Number 9 to the southern mountain, and the enemy was slowly being pushed back. However, the Dark Specialist's defenses were strong, as expected.

"Shit, shit... What do I do?" Adlet muttered as he lobbed bombs at the enemy.

Rolonia had probably gone to help the corpse soldiers. *Doesn't she get the danger we're in?*

Adlet didn't know her real intentions. *Is she really trying to help the corpse soldiers? Or could it be that Nashetania was right, and she's trying to deceive me?*

"...What are you thinking?"

A corpse soldier approached from behind and tried to pin Adlet's arms behind his back. Adlet calmly dropped his hips, grabbed the corpse soldier's arms, and chucked him forward. The corpse soldier hit the ground with his neck. Then Adlet stomped on it.

How was suspecting Rolonia going to help things? She had fallen into both Tgurneu's and Nashetania's traps. But then again, what good would come out of going to help her?

Both the things Adlet “should do” and the things he “had to do” spiraled about his mind.

"Goldof!" Adlet shouted.

He looked over to Adlet from the center of the enemy forces, where he was trying to charge forward.

"Protect Chamo! And Nashetania and Dozzu too. Don't let the soldiers lay a finger on them."

"What are you talking about?!" Goldof shouted back.

"Alright, listen up! I'm ready to act as if Dozzu and Nashetania are betraying us. So if Chamo is injured even a little, then you can consider Nashetania's life over!"

The problem with Adlet going to help Rolonia was Chamo. She would be left all alone with Dozzu's allies. So for the time being, Adlet had no other choice but to have Goldof protect Chamo for him.

Adlet believed that Goldof was fighting to keep everyone safe, not to achieve Nashetania's ambitions. Granted, he still didn't know just how much of a threat he really was. But at the moment, Goldof was his only option.

"Chamo, I'll be relying on you for everything else!"

"What are you talking about?" Chamo replied.

Without giving an answer, Adlet rushed off in the direction Rolonia had gone.

The corpse soldiers wandering about the center of the forest were nowhere to be found. Perhaps they were chasing after Rolonia.

Rolonia, why are you so intent on sticking up for the corpse soldiers? Adlet wondered as he ran.

Think. There has to be some kind of reason. Adlet thought back to when they first learned about the corpse soldiers. Then he remembered the time they had met up again at the Illusion Fog Barrier. Still, his mind couldn't hit upon anything, so he dug deeper into the past. He recalled the time two years ago when he had met her at the mountain where Atro was living. Piece by piece, he revisited each of his memories.

Then a single memory reemerged in Adlet's mind.

"It can't be.... Rolonia," Adlet muttered.

There's no way that could be it.

#

Meanwhile, Rolonia was also thinking back to the time when she had first met Adlet Maia.

#

“Life was enduring until death.” That was Rolonia Manchester's belief.

I was born unlucky, so until I die, I have to persevere. It's an impossible way of living, but there is nothing I can do about it. Rolonia had lived her whole life believing that.

That was until the day she met Adlet Maia.

Rolonia was born in Lindo, the country of blue wind. It was a very small country on the eastern outskirts of the continent—so small that most of her companion Heroes had no idea where it was.

A lot of the population lived their lives raising cows, and Rolonia's parents were no exception. Rolonia grew up staring at cows as they blithely ate weeds, and she never grew tired of them. Sometimes there was a cow that tried to stray from the herd, and it was Rolonia's job to blow on a whistle and call for her father or a herding dog.

Rolonia had loved cows. If she were asked what she believed to be the most incredible thing in the entire world, she would have answered "cows" without a moment's hesitation. Later, when her armor was being made at the Head Temple, Rolonia even went so far as to choose a cow design, even though the other Saints viewed its resemblance to the animals as a disgrace.

Her father was quiet, but he was a very compassionate man. Her mother was cheerful and talkative, and skilled at games. Through their influence she was raised to love all things, and to feel sad about other people's unhappiness.

If she had lived without any intrusions from the outside world, then she would probably have just been a simple, kind-hearted cowgirl. And she would definitely have been far happier.

But when Rolonia was about seven, bandits attacked her hometown. As they were just a small village in a small country, they did not have the power to combat an enemy that appeared so suddenly. The bandits proceeded to pillage everything, down to loose change on the ground. And in just one night, Rolonia lost both her parents and everything that was important to her.

After that, Rolonia started to realize the truth of world. It was full of pain and sadness, and people without power, intelligence, or charm had no way of escaping from it.

Now an orphan, a major businessman in the neighboring country adopted her. He was called a benevolent person for raising children who didn't have any family. However, that was just a mask that he showed the world.

He forced the orphans to work on the farmland he owned, and he would whip those that neglected their work without mercy. But even the orphans who worked hard never received a single copper coin of compensation. They were never called slaves, but in reality, that's exactly what they were.

To the children who were placed in that cruel environment, their options were limited. They couldn't change their circumstances or revolt against the unreasonable demands of their master. And it was extremely rare for anyone to even attempt to escape.

But despite the fact that the kids were extremely weak, they did find an outlet for their dissatisfaction and despair. That outlet was the dumbest of the children, Rolonia.

Each time Rolonia made a mistake, the children would beat and ridicule her. No matter how small the mistake, the children would never overlook it. They would all have fun whenever someone spotted Rolonia making a mistake. And before long it would even happen openly right in front of the adults that were supervising them.

Rolonia never fought back. She believed that she was the one who was bad. Everyone got angry because she had made a mistake, and so she was the perpetrator, and everyone else was the victim.

And even though she tried not to make another mistake, she was never able to work adequately in the end. To make matters worse, even when Rolonia hadn't done anything wrong, the other children would still say she was at fault.

Gradually she started to learn that no matter what she did, it would always be bad. No matter how hard she tried, it would be meaningless. She was just a slow person who couldn't do anything and only caused trouble for others.

At the very least, Rolonia tried to live her life without causing trouble for those around her. However, even that effort was pointless.

Because she never talked back no matter what, the children would blame everything that they did wrong on Rolonia. Her mistakes, the dissatisfaction with their worsening circumstances—all of it was made Rolonia's fault, and she was condemned for it all.

Soon Rolonia gave up even making an effort to not cause trouble for others. She would just shrink into herself, show a servile smile, and pray that the kids wouldn't bully her anymore.

Then one day a robbery took place at the farm. The leader of the children had planned it, but, naturally, all of the blame was placed on Rolonia. And even then, Rolonia believed it really was her fault.

#

Kicked out from the farmland, Rolonia wandered the land in order to stay alive. Each time she found a place to work she asked to be employed, but she was refused again and again.

Then, when she was walking through one town, she saw that a well-dressed girl's shoes were dirty. Rolonia mustered up her courage and asked the girl if she would allow Rolonia to polish her shoes with her own clothes.

With a mean smile, the girl replied, "Are you asking me to let you work no matter what the job?"

That girl was an acolyte at the Temple of Fresh Blood, aiming to become the Saint. And that day, Rolonia gained a new job.

Although the place she lived and the food she ate were different, Rolonia's life hadn't changed. Naturally, she was still slow, and the people around her didn't see her as anything other than an outlet for their dissatisfaction and resentment. But Rolonia felt no doubts about that, and she had no desire to try to remove herself from that environment.

Everything she did was bad. Now her only purpose was to live to the best of her ability without causing trouble for others. Her only hope was to live without making others angry.

That was when Rolonia started to believe, "Life was enduring until death." But then the new Saint of Fresh Blood was selected.

#

At first Rolonia wondered if there had been some kind of mistake. After that, she actually asked if someone had made a mistake. There was no way that someone like her would be a good fit for a Saint. In all of her life, she hadn't been able to do a single thing right.

Rolonia trembled at the thought of being ridiculed as the worst Saint.

After the time to hold the ceremony to relinquish the Saint's abilities was set, for a while Rolonia felt relieved. She wondered if the number of people who would get angry with her would decrease now that she was a Saint and not a servant. But it turned out Rolonia's nightmare was just beginning.

At the Head Temple, per Mora's recommendation, Rolonia got stuck with undergoing education for gifted Saints. Of course that was just a part of Mora's secret plan, but Rolonia hadn't known anything about that at the time.

“You will work hard to become a Hero of the Six Flowers.” When Rolonia heard that objective from Mora, she felt such an intense fear that she had trouble breathing and fainted. When she awoke, there was a moment when Rolonia thought that it had all just been a bad dream. But when Mora told her it was real, she fainted again.

As Mora had perceived, Rolonia's talent as a Saint was exceptional. Mora had said that Rolonia's skills were even starting to surpass the leaders at the head temple such as herself and Leura the Saint of the Sun.

But learning that didn't make Rolonia happy. It just made her feel even more afraid. Despite having unrivaled talent, she was a useless, talentless Saint. She strongly believed that was her fate. After having been so ingrained in her mind, her servile way of thinking wasn't something that could be changed easily.

By Mora's command, Rolonia apprenticed under renowned knights and warriors with years of military service. But she wasn't able to grasp their instruction and simply wasted their time.

Then Rolonia visited the enigmatic anti-Kyoma specialist Atro Spyker and met Adlet Maia.

#

Rolonia clearly remembered the first time she had seen Adlet. Her first impression had just been fear. Adlet was shirtless and throwing darts at a target. His teeth were clenched, his eyes were blood shot, and his hands were cracked and blistered from throwing the darts. The instant she saw him, Rolonia thought he was like a Kyoma from one of the legendary tales of the Six Flowers. His whole existence seemed to be nothing other than hatred and the desire to kill.

"I'm Adlet Maia. Eventually I will be the strongest man in the world, but right now I'm not. Don't talk to me."

Even though he felt the need to demand it, she didn't want to talk with him at all anyway. Rolonia nodded again and again and started to back away. The next instant, Adlet let out a war cry and came rushing towards her.

Rolonia grabbed her head and crumpled to the ground. However, his real target had been Atro. Atro easily tossed Adlet to the ground, then proceeded to kick him again and again. When Adlet was unable to move, Atro stepped on his face and spat on him.

This is such a dreadful place. Why has this happened to me? Rolonia wondered, cursing her fate as she watched Atro torture Adlet.

#

Several days passed. As they had both agreed, Adlet and Rolonia didn't interact with each other at all. Rolonia was instructed by Atro about the Kyoma, and when she wasn't being taught, she studied on her own by reading the books Atro had written himself. Atro personally took care of her.

But during the breaks between her lectures and her self-study, Rolonia stared at Adlet. It seemed like he was more working on hurting himself than training. Every day he challenged Atro, but it always seemed like it was just to be tormented.

I wonder what he's doing. Though the thought crossed her mind, she didn't have the courage to talk with him.

Still, Rolonia couldn't figure out why she was so interested in Adlet. Maybe she had fallen in love with him when they met without her realizing it. Or perhaps she pitied him for getting hurt. Or perhaps she was superimposing the image of him injured and suffering on the ground onto the memory of herself and all of the bullying she'd experienced in the past.

Then one night Rolonia went into the cave where Adlet had been sleeping, deliberately breaking Atro's order not to interfere with Adlet.

Rolonia figured she would heal Adlet while he was sleeping and then try to run away right after. She guessed that he wouldn't get angry about that. However, the instant she laid her hands on him, Adlet jumped up.

"What did you come here for?!"

He was angry, and if things got any worse, he would kill her. Rolonia jumped back and trembled in the corner of the cave.

"M-M-M-Master Atro told me to treat you..."

Rolonia lied to him on the spur of the moment, but she immediately regretted it. People always figured out whenever she was lying. But Adlet unexpectedly lay down and allowed her to treat him.

With an inexperienced hand, she awkwardly healed his wounds. The ability to heal was the only thing that people other than her parents had ever praised her about. She'd always wondered when she would actually put it to use. Rolonia's lips stretched into a thin smile.

After that she decided she would talk with Adlet. But when Rolonia told him about herself, Adlet become enraged. He shouted and wanted to know why she would throw away power that she had gone through so much trouble to acquire. With tears spilling down his face, he begged for power.

Rolonia thought she had again ended up saying something bad, so she tried to get Adlet to stop crying. However, as she tried, she also burst out into tears. Adlet had been the first one to start crying, but, conversely, Rolonia was the one who ended up needing to be consoled. If an outsider were to see them, they would probably think they were a pair of idiots.

As dawn approached, Adlet apologized to Rolonia.

"My bad. I'm sorry. Things must be tough for you too."

"I... No, it's alright."

"How I am now is no good. I need to become stronger. If I were really strong, then I wouldn't have made you cry." Adlet flashed a lonely smile.

He isn't the person I thought he was, Rolonia felt. He was a young boy, delicate, but extremely compassionate.

After that, Rolonia's eyes followed Adlet wherever he went. And little by little, the reason for her doing so started to change.

Chapter Five: Part Two

After their night in the cave, Rolonia would talk with Adlet whenever possible, even though his training left him little time to spend with her. And though it was completely contrary to his orders, Atro never mentioned if he was disgusted or indifferent to her actions.

As if he were making up for yelling at her the first time they'd met, Adlet treated her nicely. He listened to her concerns and ramblings about the past. Sometimes he would offer her advice, other times he would encourage her, and at times he would even scold her. All the while, Rolonia would heal Adlet's wounds and cheer him up.

However, Adlet wasn't just a kind boy. When he lamented the fact that he didn't have power, he would show a face more terrifying than anything Rolonia had ever seen before—though after their first meeting, he never took his anger out on her.

Adlet was a mysterious boy. One moment he seemed to be full of hatred like a Kyoma, but the next instant, he would smile cheerfully. When he had a terrifying face, Rolonia didn't want to get close to him. But when he was kind she could talk with him peacefully.

He could be both kind and terrifying, and Rolonia didn't know which side was the real him. She knew that he was strongly determined to become a Hero of the Six Flowers, but they never talked about why he wanted that so badly.

Over time, Rolonia realized that she was enjoying her conversations with him. Other than her late parents, he was the only person she could talk to without feeling afraid. He was the only person in the whole world to whom she could tell her true feelings. Though they had only just met, Rolonia was starting to hold him dear in her heart.

And it didn't take long for her to realize that what she was feeling was love.

#

One day after a lecture, Rolonia asked Atro if Adlet could become one of the Heroes of the Six Flowers. Atro coldly replied the chance was one in a million due to one reason: Adlet didn't have any talent. But somehow, it seemed like even Adlet was aware of that.

Rolonia was unable to resist the mystery. *Why would someone continue to challenge something when they knew they couldn't do it?*

If it wasn't possible, then it would be better just to give up. To try really hard and fail would lead to far more injuries than not trying at all. That way of thinking had been ingrained into Rolonia's mind.

Then, late one night while she was healing Adlet's wounds, Rolonia tried asking him about it.

"...Adlet-san, how? How are you able to keep going and not feel like giving up?"

To her question, Adlet answered back coldly, "Are you saying that to me too, Rolonia?"

Rolonia feared that she had made him angry and she trembled just thinking about being hated by her only friend. However, Adlet just smiled.

"Everyone says that. They say I have no talent. My master, the other disciples who ran away, and all of the people who would sometimes come here, like you. At first I thought, don't screw with me; but recently even I'm starting to wonder if everyone is right."

"Adlet-san. That's..."

"So, I've decided to answer like this. If I can't change the fact that I have no talent, maybe that's fine."

"...Huh?"

Adlet smiled and continued, "Isn't it far more incredible for someone who doesn't have a sliver of talent to become the World's Strongest than someone who was born as a prodigy?"

"Uh, yeah."

"If I can do that, I will certainly be the strongest. A prodigy could never experience such a marvelous feeling as that."

"..."

"I've quit crying about how I wish I had talent. I'll make myself become the World's Strongest just like I am."

Rolonia fell silent.

For so long she had believed that she was a bad person and that trying your hardest was pointless. However, Adlet was reaching for a lifestyle completely different from her own.

And that side of Adlet seemed radiant to her.

Even though he didn't have any kind of power, Adlet was going to continue fighting without ever giving up. Whereas Rolonia, despite having the abilities of a Saint, just continued running away.

Suddenly, Rolonia felt ashamed to be at Adlet's side.

"Adlet-san. If you never get strong.... If no matter how hard you try it doesn't work, what will you do?"

"...That's a difficult question," Adlet said, and laughed quietly. "Well, there's no need to think about that. I will never give up as long as I live. That way I don't have to worry about failure."

I see. So it's really okay to think like that? Rolonia wondered, and smiled.

#

It's no good if I continue like this, Rolonia thought. If she continued to be scared and run away, then she would never be able to be by Adlet's side. *I have to change. I have to become strong. If I don't, then Adlet will just look down on me.*

Rolonia loved Adlet. However, he would probably never look at her like that. Becoming strong was everything to him; he had no time for relationships. On top of that, Rolonia wasn't smart, or pretty. Really, there was no way that she would ever be a good match for him.

Nevertheless, Rolonia wanted to be with Adlet. She wanted to devote herself to him. She wanted to see him smile. She wanted to become the person who could be by his side. And that is what she wished for.

#

The entire time Rolonia had been on the mountain, she'd known that Adlet had been given a single, albeit extremely difficult assignment. From the day Rolonia came, he had one month to defeat Atro, using whatever means necessary. If he couldn't do that, then he would be banished and driven off the mountain.

Even Rolonia, who was a complete amateur when it came to fighting, could understand the difference in skill between Adlet and Atro. It didn't matter if he tried to take him by surprise or if he plotted some strategy. Adlet just couldn't touch Atro.

On the last day before the deadline, Atro nonchalantly went into the classroom in a small hut. The next instant, Adlet dropped down from the rafters where he had been hiding and attacked Atro.

Without any sense of panic, Atro thrust out his short spear. Adlet swatted it to the side with his sword, but before he could follow up with another attack, Atro landed a kick that sent him flying backwards. Adlet tumbled across the hut floor before finally stopping at Rolonia's feet.

"Master Atro, I'm sorry!" Rolonia shouted.

Then she touched some cloth in her bag that had been soaked with her blood. At her touch, the cloth stretched out of the bag like a living creature, wrapped about Atro and bound his arms to his body.

"Great job, Rolonia!" Atro shouted and stood to his feet.

Atro then thrust his javelin forward, but Adlet dodged it and grabbed it with his left hand. At the same time, he held his sword to Atro's throat.

"Whatever means necessary, you said," Adlet said with a smile.

Seeing Adlet like that made Rolonia shiver. *Is this really a good thing?*

"Did you think I was clever enough to come up with a plan like this?" Adlet asked.

Atro replied by quietly dropping his javelin. He then tore off the cloth that was wrapped about him and left the classroom.

Rolonia didn't quite understand what was happening, but for the moment, it seemed like Adlet had succeeded. Adlet tossed away his sword and jumped up for joy. He then rushed over and hugged Rolonia.

"I was a fool. There's no need to fight alone. It doesn't matter how I do it, or if I get help from my friends. If it ends with me winning, then I am the World's Strongest."

He then picked up his sword and ran outside.

"Thank you, Rolonia. But I can't be satisfied with this. I have to keep training!"

As his footsteps grew distant, Rolonia remained all alone in the classroom, blushing at the memory of Adlet's embrace.

#

Her time on the mountain passed in the blink of an eye, and before Rolonia knew it, the day she was to leave was on the horizon. Though it was hard to believe, Adlet and Rolonia had become close friends. In fact, Rolonia stopped using polite language and instead of Adlet-san she started to call him Ad-kun.¹

And about three days before they parted, within the dark cave, Adlet started to talk about his past. Rolonia didn't know why he suddenly brought it up, but she figured that maybe it was Adlet's form of a last will or something like that. Under Atro's instruction, Adlet was usually forced to dance with death—if he made even the slightest mistake, then he could easily die. So he probably wanted to leave behind some proof that he'd existed.

He told her about how a single Kyoma suddenly appeared at his village, and how in one night the villagers all seemed to transform into different people. He also told her about his sister and best friend who died protecting him. Bit by painful bit, he revealed his past.

"...That...." Rolonia was at a loss for words.

¹ -San is the standard polite last name honorific equivalent to Mr./Ms. -Kun is used for young boys or close male friends. It denotes a sense of endearment that is completely absent when using -San.

"Can you not tell anyone about this? It's why I said not to talk to me when we first met."

"How come?"

"That Kyoma was completely calm when he came to my village. He already knew the inner workings of my village and wasn't surprised or scared at all. I feel he has connections in the human world."

Adlet gritted his teeth.

"I don't want him to know that I'm alive. If he knows that I'm planning my revenge, then he'll come and kill me. At the moment, I'm...sadly no match for him."

"But..."

So this is serious. I have to tell Mora or Weylynn, Rolonia realized. But as if he knew what she was thinking, Adlet shook his head.

"I will kill him. I will kill him and get revenge for him destroying my village. I have to do that. So stay quiet."

It was an irrational request, but Rolonia wondered if his situation could actually be handled rationally.

As promised, Rolonia never told anyone about what Adlet had told her. Although she believed it was a bad idea, Adlet's request was more important than her feelings.

"Ad-kun, if you become a Hero of the Six Flowers, defeat that lizard Kyoma, and return.... What will you do next?"

Adlet hesitated for a moment.

"Hmm, I don't know. I guess I'll end up thinking about that later. I will become the strongest man in the world, so I'll probably be able to do anything."

"Ad-kun, what do you want to do?"

Again Adlet hesitated.

"Do you want to return to your village and live life how you used to?"

Adlet shook his head.

"The people at my village died a long time ago. They're in the stomachs of the Kyoma." Adlet's words were full of both loneliness and anger.

"That may not necessarily be true. They could be alive."

"I wonder," Adlet replied, though there was no energy in his voice. "I wonder what I should do if I see them again. They killed Sis and Raina. Maybe the moment I saw their faces, I would kill them all."

Adlet gave her a look that made her shudder, but soon his eyes returned to a sad look.

"But I would most likely regret it afterwards. Maybe I'd continue to regret it until the day I died."

His heart was swaying back and forth from his fond memories of the villagers to his feelings of hatred towards them.

"You know, I think it'd be better not to kill them after all," Rolonia offered.

Adlet gave her a small smile.

"I don't think anything will go back to how it was. And I think it would take time for you to forgive them. But someday, you would be able to become close once more and live together in peace."

"If that happens.... I'd like that."

Adlet didn't say it, but his tone clearly implied that he didn't think that would ever become a reality.

"...Ad-kun."

If you sacrifice your entire life to gain power and end up fighting your whole life, then you'll be left with nothing but regret and loneliness. That's too sad. I want you to be happy, Adlet. You need to be happy.

"I wonder if they're alive. If they're already dead then I would be lonely—I'd be completely alone."

"...Ad-kun."

"I want to see everyone again," Adlet said, and buried his face into his knees. Then he began to cry quietly.

Until that time, Rolonia hadn't even thought about fighting with the Kyoma or anything like that. But that was the first time she started to feel that she couldn't forgive the Kyoma who had visited Adlet's village.

Though the chance is one in a million, if there is some kind of mistake and I am selected to be one of the Heroes of the Six Flowers, then I should help the people from his hometown, Rolonia decided, and immediately she was filled with a new determination.

I will prove to you that I can help save the people from your hometown. And for your happiness, Adlet, I feel like I can become strong.

#

After that Rolonia descended the mountain and headed back to the Head Temple.

Adlet didn't come to see her off when she left. However, he did notice she was leaving during a break in his sword training and gave her a big wave. *He doesn't think about me as much as I think about him,* Rolonia realized, feeling a bit lonely.

But no matter how he felt about her, meeting him had definitely changed Rolonia. At least, she believed it had. It was true that even if she left the mountain she would still be bad. She had poor memory, was scared of everything, and didn't have any confidence in herself. Humans couldn't change themselves overnight.

Even so, there was no reason why she couldn't fight the fact that she was a good-for-nothing. If she was a bad person then she should try hard not to be. And if that didn't lead to any results, then she would deal with it and try again. Life was suffering until death. So she decided to persevere and improve instead of running away and staying the same.

If she just continued to quit and run away like she had done her entire life, then she would have no qualification to be Adlet's friend.

After gaining the power of the Saint, she met many people and learned a variety of things. Her greatest teachers were Mora, Weylynn the Saint of Salt, and Ueron the Saint of Medicine, as well as the legendary military master Tomas, the Aged Hero Straud, and the Anti-Kyoma specialist Atro.

However, everything they taught her was far less important than what she learned from Adlet. And he probably hadn't even intended to teach her anything.

She really wanted to be by his side and support him. She wanted to talk with him more. She wanted to heal his wounds, and she wanted him to touch her. But probably none of that would make Adlet happy.

Maybe the two of them would never meet again.

Nevertheless, Rolonia believed that all the important things she learned from him would be enough to make her happy.

#

Using her whip to hang from a tree limb, Rolonia hoisted her body up into the air and leaped forward. Repeating that again and again, she advanced through the forest.

It was simply impossible for her to look for a way to help them while fighting with them at the same time, so she was trying to get away from the corpse soldiers so that she could search the cave carefully when she arrived. Thankfully, the number of corpse soldiers chasing after her was decreasing quite a bit, and it seemed like she was slowly pulling away from the rest as well.

"I'm tired, but so are the soldiers," Rolonia muttered.

Rolonia still didn't know what was in that cave, and it might be a trap like Adlet had said. Still, she wanted to bet on that slight chance.

When Adlet found out that his villagers had all been transformed into the corpse soldiers, a number of things had happened. He'd secluded himself at the center of the hut, then gritted his teeth and, wearing an expression of sorrow, said to abandon the corpse soldiers; and then he had told Rolonia not to distract him anymore. At each of those moments, Rolonia's chest burned and her body shook with anger.

If Adlet were to abandon the corpse soldiers in their current state, then he would regret it for the rest of his life, and that was something Rolonia couldn't allow.

She might not be able to help all of the people from his hometown, but at the very least she wanted to help just one of them. She wanted to at least be able to let him see one of them one more time, if only for a moment.

She wanted to fight for the happiness of the people whose lives had been changed by the Kyoma, and for the person who to her was the most precious in the whole world.

Rolonia knew that she was giving Adlet and the others a hard time, but she wasn't able to ignore how she felt.

"Just a little more!"

Rolonia was approaching the edge of the forest; however, she still hadn't been able to shake off all of the corpse soldiers.

"Ugh," she grunted and turned around.

She had no choice but to fight. Of course she wanted to make them unable to fight without having to kill them, if that was possible. However, she was also aware that if she didn't break both of their legs or inflict similar damage, then it wouldn't stop them from coming after her.

Rolonia swung her whip at two approaching corpse soldiers, making sure not to use too much strength. But the soldiers nimbly dodged the weak attack, threw up their arms, and attacked Rolonia.

"Guah!"

Her pauldrons² blocked their blows, but the force of their fists still flung her backwards. As she spiraled back through the air, she swung her whip, aiming for their arms and legs and trying as hard as possible not to inflict a fatal injury.

Rolonia's whip struck the legs of one of the corpse soldiers, breaking them, and then the next attack directly hit the arm of another corpse soldier. Its sleeve tore off, and a jet of blood sprayed out into the air as the soldier dropped to the ground. But within the carnage, she noticed something on its arm.

There were words carved into its flesh. She moved over closer and read, *Look for me and help. The man with words on his right arm. He knows about Tgurneu's secret weapon.*

It was a message from one of the corpse soldiers seeking help. She had seen something just like it earlier: *Help. I know*, had been written on the arm of another corpse soldier.

² Armor plating that covers shoulders.

Is the message saying that one of the corpse soldiers knew about Tgurneu's plan? Is Tgurneu's secret weapon the Black Barren Flower? If that's true, then now I have to help the soldiers even more. Still, I can't find out anything until I reach the Temple of Fate.

"I wonder if, by any chance, Nashetania-san knew about this," Rolonia said to herself.

Nashetania had gotten in the way of Rolonia trying to heal the corpse soldiers, so maybe her goal was to conceal the truth of Tgurneu's secret plan. If so, then Nashetania, Goldof, Dozzu, the seventh, and Tgurneu were working together.

Maybe they are all trying to hide the truth of the Black Barren Flower, Rolonia thought as she left the two fallen corpse soldiers and pushed onwards to the cave.

#

Number 9 noticed that Adlet had disappeared from sight. He knew that Rolonia had fallen into a trap, so it seemed likely that he had left in a hurry to go help her.

Tgurneu had said that he was the one among the Six Flowers whom Number 9 definitely shouldn't underestimate. However, he wasn't that formidable. His plan was to charge into the corpse soldiers without any kind of strategy, and now he was blindly rushing off to save Rolonia without any clue about the trap.

Even so, Adlet chasing after Rolonia was a bit of a problem, so Number 9 ordered the corpse soldiers wandering about the forest to intercept and stop him.

The next instant, one of the sparks from Dozzu's electricity reached all the way to Number 9. The disruption made the sound wave he was emitting to control the corpse soldiers fluctuate slightly.

In response, Number 9 commanded the brainless corpses to strengthen his protection and then continued south.

#

As Raina pursued the armored girl, he could feel fatigue wash over his left arm. The next moment, he was once again able to move it.

If I can just move a bit faster, Raina thought. If I can move my arm while I'm close to that girl, then I might be able to show her that I'm alive.

He moved his left arm and struck a tree with the tip of his index finger. A splinter stabbed into him, causing a trickle of blood to run out from the tip. Using that blood he attempted to write, *Don't be tricked*, on his clothing. It was tough because his body was still being forced to chase after the armored girl, and on top of that he couldn't move his neck, so he was unable to see what he was doing. But he hoped it was legible enough to get the point across.

Before anything else, he had to stop that armored girl and tell her that there was a trap. If she were to die, then telling her the truth about the Black Barren Flower would definitely be out of the question.

Raina ripped off the section of his clothing with the words written on it. His clothes were in tatters and tore easily. He then balled up that cloth and threw it straight up into the air. The wind took it, and he prayed that it would be sent towards the girl.

Is there anything else....anything else I can do? Raina wondered.

His left arm was moving again. There had to be things he could still do.

He took out the small fragment of stone that he'd placed in his pocket, then he stuck his arm straight out to the side. His upper arm collided with the trunk of a tree, and Raina's body tumbled to the ground face up.

With his left arm, Raina grabbed hold of the tree trunk and used it to keep his body still. Both of his legs scrambled rapidly to right him, and his right hand stuck its nails into his arm to tear it off from the tree.

Raina put up with the pain and jabbed the fragment of stone into the tree. He then moved it about and tried to write.

Other Flowers, you may be following the armored girl. Tell her not to be fooled.

It was taking all the energy in his body to hold onto the tree, continue to grip the stone fragment in his hand, and try to write a message despite the rest of his body violently struggling to free itself.

But it was pointless. *Don't*, was all he could write before numbness once again gripped his left arm. He was again losing control of his arm, and the instant the energy started to leave his limb, his right arm tore it from the tree. Raina's body was then forced to a stand and rushed off in the direction of the armored girl.

Within his confined field of vision, Raina could see the small cloth falling through the air. He had prayed that the cloth would ride on the wind all the way to the girl, but it just floated in the air for a bit before coming right back down.

Powerless, Raina thought. No matter how many words he left behind, they wouldn't reach anyone. And even though he had realized the trap, he couldn't tell anyone about it.

Am I nothing more than a bystander? This entire time he had fought with the goal of helping the Six Flowers and saving the world, but really, he couldn't do anything but watch.

No, Raina said to himself. Raina thought about Adlet. Surely he was living peacefully somewhere, and he was praying that the Six Flowers were protecting the world for him.

I will protect his happiness. He is my friend for life, and I am his. As long as Adlet is alive, I cannot lose hope.

Whenever Raina felt like giving up, whenever he felt weighed down with powerlessness, he would always encourage himself with the memory of Adlet.

My left arm will move again, so I've got to figure out what to do when that happens. There has to be something else I can do.

As Raina tried to think of a plan, a lizard Kyoma with four heads on long, serpentine necks appeared and attacked him. And even though Raina wished for it not to interfere, his silent pleas didn't reach the Kyoma.

Chapter Five: Part Three

As Adlet fought with the corpse soldiers, his mind went back to two years ago when he had told Rolonia about his past, when he had burst into tears right in front of her and said how he wanted to see the villagers from his hometown again.

Could Rolonia be trying to help the corpse soldiers for me?

"Rolonia, you idiot."

She didn't need to worry about him, nor did she need to fight on his behalf. The only things she should think about were protecting the world and protecting herself.

In a sense, maybe I'm the one who brought about this situation? But, it doesn't matter. I can't let Rolonia die. I have to help her.

Dozens of corpse soldiers were chasing after Adlet, and each time one of them screamed, their numbers increased. Adlet's smoke bombs clouded the soldiers' vision, allowing him to hide atop the tree branches as he ran.

Aside from the corpses that were chasing him, Adlet could also see another group of dozens of corpse soldiers running to the south. They were probably going to reinforce the corpse soldiers that were fighting Goldof, Chamo and the others.

The attacks from the corpse soldiers were non-stop, but Adlet managed to evade their attacks long enough to scale a tree. From the top of the tree, he looked about the area in search of Rolonia and spotted a piece of cloth floating in the air at the edge of his vision.

"...What is that?"

Is Rolonia trying to send me a message? he wondered. *Maybe she's closer than I thought.*

Adlet headed in the direction the cloth had fallen, running from tree to tree along the limbs before dropping down to the forest floor. But no one was there, and there was no sign that Rolonia had been fighting there either.

I came here for nothing, Adlet thought and started to run, when out of the corner of his eye he spotted something strange carved into a tree trunk.

"...Are those words?"

It seemed like just a scratch in the bark, but once he started to look at them as words, it became clear that was what they were.

"Don't," was written, and above that there were signs that someone had tried to write something else.

Adlet didn't understand what it meant, but there was no time to think about it. Though he had managed to shake off most of the corpse soldiers, one managed to find him and immediately shrieked to its comrades. In response, the corpse soldiers came barreling towards Adlet one after another, and once again Adlet had to run.

He looked down to the crest on his right hand and saw that all of the petals were still there. For now at least, Rolonia was still safe.

#

As he fought with the lizard Kyoma, Raina once again felt a wave of exhaustion grab hold of his left arm. And, for the fourth time that day, he was able to move his arm again.

The first time he moved it, it had seemed like he was close to victory. But now it just brought a gloom of despair.

The armored girl had left without noticing him and there were no signs of any of the other Heroes coming near.

Don't give up, he thought, trying to cheer himself up.

He tore his clothes into shreds and threw pieces of it into the air over and over again. He may not have had time to write "don't be tricked," but even so, he needed to tell the Flowers that something was happening, and that there was someone different than the other corpse soldiers.

Heroes of the Six Flowers, notice me. I'm here.

However, though he had tried throwing a bit of his clothing with a message up into the air, it just came tumbling back down to the ground after being carried on the wind for only a moment. It wasn't able to rise above the branches, let alone reach the Heroes.

A number of Kyoma were approaching to support the group that was fighting with the corpse soldiers, and when Raina turned to the new arrivals, the lizard Kyoma lunged at him. Its mouth was stretched wide open, and inside that massive darkness Raina could see everything he had struggled for coming to an end.

#

Rolonia had finally exited the forest, and was now close to the Fainting Mountains. But she still couldn't find the cave.

She walked slowly and vigilantly, her whip tightly gripped in her hand. As Adlet had said, there was a chance that this was all a trap, so she couldn't let her guard down.

As she walked about looking for the cave, Rolonia recalled something that one of the corpse soldiers had said. "In the cave... Hidden woman.... Help us." *Maybe that woman knows of a way to help the corpse soldiers, Rolonia figured. I have to find out.*

Then suddenly she heard a voice echo towards her.

"Are you one of...the Six Flowers?" The voice was so faint that it was hard to make out what it was saying.

Rolonia spun around and spotted a ragged figure standing within the shadow of a boulder a few meters away. Without thinking, she uncoiled her whip and prepared to fight.

"No. I am not a corpse soldier.... Please. Don't attack...."

Rolonia looked at her a bit closer. It was true. Though her body was just as filthy as the corpse soldiers and she was wrapped in rags, her skin was full of life, and she didn't have a parasite in her neck. Judging from her appearance, Rolonia guessed she was over 60 years old and most likely didn't have the strength to fight, or any kind of weapons on her. Then again, neither would a Saint.

"I am not your enemy. Please, the corpse soldiers.... My husband, please help them."

"I'm sorry, but please don't come any closer!" Rolonia said in a loud and firm voice.

The woman stopped almost immediately. Rolonia then swung her whip, and the tip struck both of the woman's shoulders and thighs. Rolonia didn't want to do it, but it couldn't be helped.

"Ahhh! No, I'm not a corpse..."

"I'm sorry," Rolonia said, cutting her off. "I don't intend on attacking you, but I just have to make sure."

Rolonia licked the old woman's blood left on the tip of her whip. She partially suspected that the woman was a metamorphosis Kyoma. Back during their battle yesterday, a metamorphosis Kyoma had fooled everyone into thinking that it was the real Nashetania, so Rolonia made sure to thoroughly analyze the blood on her tongue.

However, Rolonia didn't taste even a hint of Kyoma's blood. The woman was definitely human.

"I'm... I'm sorry about that." Rolonia said, approaching the woman. "I.... I am searching for a way to help the..."

Before Rolonia could finish talking, the old woman fell on her in an embrace.

"You came, you really came! This is great, so great!"

Rolonia pulled the woman off of her. "Who are you? By any chance, do you know of a way to help the corpse soldiers?"

"You came to help! I thought it was hopeless! I thought we had been abandoned!"

Rolonia shook her a bit to calm her down. "What in the world is going on? Why are you here?"

"I fear this is not the time to have that talk. Please, follow me. I ask that you show compassion for the corpse soldiers."

The old woman took Rolonia by the hand and started to hurry away from their location.

As they ran, she explained, "Ten years ago, I was brought to the Wailing Demon Territory. The time after that was truly hell. And to make matters worse, half a year ago I was deemed to be no longer of use, and the Kyoma tried to make me into a corpse soldier....but my son hid me. So for all of this time, I've been surviving by pretending to be one of the corpse soldiers."

"Do you know of a way to help the corpse soldiers?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"...My son and my son's friends fought to release the humans in the Wailing Demon Territory. In the process, they found out the secret of the corpse soldiers. But all of them were killed or turned into corpse soldiers before they were able to tell the world.... I was the only one they could tell."

The old woman wore a face of sorrow, and her body was frail, injured, and exhausted. It didn't seem like she was acting. Rolonia didn't completely trust her eyes, but she believed this woman.

"I heard about a cave from the corpse soldiers."

"Ah, so it's true. Even though my son and his companions were turned into corpse soldiers, they are still trying to help everyone."

Tears started to glitter in the old woman's eyes.

"Are you....are you from Adlet-san's village?" Rolonia asked, and the old woman's eyes opened wide. But then she shook her head.

"I don't know any Adlet..."

Rolonia felt a bit of despair after hearing that. She wished Adlet could see one of his villagers again. But on second thought, Rolonia realized what *she* wanted. In reality, helping the corpse soldiers wasn't just for Adlet's benefit. It would help all the people who had been killed despite having done nothing wrong.

"Well then, what will you do about the corpse soldiers?"

"Shh. There is someone over there."

Halfway up a mid-sized mountain ridge, the old woman came to a stop and placed her hand to her mouth. Rolonia scaled up the ridge without making a sound and quietly peeked out. There was a cliff, and at the bottom of it was the opening to a cave. At the entrance there was a spider Kyoma using its four front legs to hold down a corpse soldier, and around the spider, ten corpse soldiers stood in wait.

"...Have you seen the insect Kyoma? The bony Kyoma at the center of the forest?"

"That's Dark Specialist Number 9. He is fighting with my companions right now."

"Actually, there is another Kyoma besides Number 9. The two Kyoma are working together to control the corpse soldiers."

Rolonia listened closely to the old woman, while also keeping her eyes trained on the spider Kyoma. So far, it didn't seem to have noticed them.

"The other Kyoma destroys people's minds and changes them into living corpses. Then the bony Kyoma inserts parasites into their bodies to control them."

If I can kill that Kyoma... Rolonia gripped her whip tightly. Her usual curses were on the verge of spilling out from her mouth. But right as she was about to explode with rage, the woman stopped her.

"The spider Kyoma is not the one destroying their minds. It is just protecting it."

"What do you mean?"

"The Kyoma destroying their minds...is inside the body of that corpse soldier."

Rolonia stared at the corpse soldier the spider was holding down.

"It is a leech-like Kyoma about 50 centimeters long, concealed inside that person's body. It is destroying the minds of the corpse soldiers, though I don't know how."

In other words, killing that spider Kyoma would release the pinned down corpse soldier. And then she would kill the leech Kyoma within its body to free all the other corpse soldiers.

Again, Rolonia's grip tightened on her whip.

"But, my son said that we can't kill the leech Kyoma first. If the minds of the corpse soldiers return while still exposed to the parasites, then everyone will die."

Rolonia considered the possibility for a moment. *If I killed that leech Kyoma, then I would wipe out all of the corpse soldiers. My companions would be able to head to the Temple of Fate immediately.* It was tempting, but in the end, Rolonia couldn't do it.

There is a corpse soldier that knew about Tgurneu's secret plan. I have to find that person and ask them about it.

"You have to kill the bony insect Kyoma and then destroy the leech Kyoma. If even a little bit of time passes, the leech Kyoma will go berserk and make it so that the corpse soldiers' minds will never be able to return to normal."

"I understand. I'll tr....try."

But I don't have any confidence I can do it, Rolonia was about to say. But she swallowed those words and instead said, "I'll definitely be able to do it. I'm a Hero of the Six Flowers."

Adlet had said that in order to accomplish something, first you had to believe yourself that you could do it. Then you had to say it. So Rolonia decided to put his advice into practice.

"I will prove I can do it. So try not to worry."

Rolonia didn't suspect a thing. At first she had wondered whether the woman was a part of some trap, but now she believed the old woman's words completely. It wasn't just because she was human, or because of the desperation in her voice. In fact, the biggest reason was probably the fact that Rolonia's own desire to help the corpse soldiers was clouding her ability to doubt people.

Rolonia stuck her whip into the ground and sat.

Adlet and the others were most likely driving Number 9 towards the southern mountain, and soon they would be within Fremy's range. All of which meant that there was no longer any time left.

But there was still one last thing that Rolonia had to check before she left. She looked at the old woman's face and said, "Is the person who knows about Tgurneu's secret weapon friends with your son?"

"Huh?"

The old woman looked at Rolonia, completely taken by surprise.

"There are words written on the bodies of the corpse soldiers. Do you know anything about that?"

The old woman was astounded by her words.

"What are you... What in the world...."

The woman didn't know. Rolonia was about to ask why not, when the spider Kyoma shrieked. Rolonia immediately shifted her attention to the spider and rushed towards the cave. She would think about the woman's response later.

I have to take out both the spider Kyoma and the other corpse soldiers with just one attack, she thought as the spider Kyoma spat thread in her direction.

Rolonia jumped with all her strength and then latched her whip onto a tree to lift her higher into the air. Once aloft, she swung with her whip to dodge the thread before landing back to the ground and heading right for the spider Kyoma. There were only about five meters between her and the spider, and since it had been caught off guard, it wasn't able to move before she was within striking range.

"...gigi!" The spider Kyoma shrieked, and the ten corpse soldiers scrambled towards Rolonia all at once.

Without missing a beat, Rolonia cut open her wrists with her nails, and a geyser of blood erupted from her body. The amount of blood was much more than should have been possible for one human body to hold, and all of it rained down onto the Kyoma and the corpse soldiers. The instant the Saint's blood touched the spider, it began to scream and jerk in pain.

Meanwhile, for the corpses, the blood simply got into their eyes, temporarily making it difficult to see and forcing them to stop moving.

Manipulating blood was Rolonia's only trump card.

"I'm sorry!" Rolonia shouted and swung her whip. The whip revolved about the vicinity and mowed down the soldiers. Then it slashed apart the spider Kyoma's body, and within an instant, the Kyoma was dead.

Then the corpse soldier that the spider Kyoma was holding down clawed to its feet and charged at Rolonia. She was able to jump a bit to the side, but the corpse soldier still managed to clip her shoulder, sending a wave of numbness through her arm.

Rolonia grunted from the blow, but she couldn't kill this corpse soldier. Instead, she swung her whip and bound both its arms and legs. The corpse soldier crashed to the ground, and Rolonia rushed over and bit into its shoulder.

From the taste of its blood, she tried to locate the other Kyoma within its body. However, Rolonia's tongue detected nothing other than the same flavor she'd tasted from the other corpse soldiers.

That can't be right. As she bit into the soldier again, the old woman started to run over.

"What are you doing? The Kyoma is in its chest! Allow me to help!"

The woman had almost reached Rolonia's side when suddenly an angry shout echoed through the air.

"Rolonia! Get away from her!" Adlet shouted from atop the ridge.

#

Adlet sprinted through the forest with the corpse soldiers trailing right behind him. He used smoke pellets to block their vision and explosives to scatter them, but they just kept coming. In the end, he was forced to use his sword to cut down those that made it past his devices. He was trying to avoid fighting as much as he could so that he could make up some ground, but so far he still hadn't been able to catch up to Rolonia. But the corpses were fierce, and Adlet's evasion and defenses took all of his concentration. If he lost focus then he would be killed, and he would have failed to protect Rolonia.

Suddenly he heard the shrieks of the corpse soldiers and some Jyuma to the side.

I've got it, Adlet thought. I'll lead the corpse soldiers right into them.

There were five or six Jyuma clumped together in a corner of the forest. Lizard Jyuma, water snake Jyuma, and water spider Jyuma were trading constant blows with the corpse soldiers. Adlet ran right past them.

He felt bad for the Jyuma, but he also needed to shake off his pursuers. And just as he'd expected, half of the corpse soldiers that were following him were distracted by the Jyuma and stopped their pursuit.

It made things a bit better for Adlet. He climbed up another tree and scanned over the area. He was sure he had run a decent distance, but he still hadn't closed the distance between him and Rolonia.

All he could see from the top of the tree was a Jyuma eating part of a corpse soldier, and a piece of cloth stuck on a branch. Other than that, there was nothing out of the ordinary, and absolutely no trace of Rolonia.

Hearing the corpse soldiers gaining on him once again, Adlet threw some bombs, then dropped back down to the forest floor and continued running.

"Chii!" A corpse soldier came at Adlet from the side.

He'd already used up all of the smoke pellets in his waist pouches, so that defense was off the table. Of course, there were still some pellets in the iron box on his back, but he didn't have any time to take them out. Instead, Adlet came to a stop and blocked the corpse soldier's attacks with his sword. For a few moments he deflected the strikes as he waited for the other corpse soldiers to approach. Then, when the others were in range, Adlet threw his chain up and hooked it to a branch.

The instant the other corpse soldiers lashed forward, Adlet pulled the chain taut and rushed up the tree trunk. As he ran up the bark, he dropped a bomb beneath him. Adlet then jumped off the tree, crossed his arms in front of his face and tucked his legs into his chest just as the bomb went off. The force of the explosion seared Adlet's skin, and slim fragments of the tree shot off the trunk and stabbed into his body. Still, with a twist in the air, he righted himself and landed on the ground in a crouch.

The corpse soldiers were able to avoid the direct explosion, but the shockwave from the bomb blew them violently to the ground. It didn't stop them from still trying to pursue Adlet; however the impact from hitting the ground broke most of their bones and rendered them immobile.

Having shaken off all of the corpse soldiers, Adlet continued his search for Rolonia. He exited the forest, and afterward he scaled up a ridge.

"I'm sorry!" he heard Rolonia shout from somewhere.

She's still safe, Adlet thought and headed in the direction of her voice.

There was a large cave at the foot of the mountain they were on. Rolonia was there, but Adlet could also see a dead Kyoma and the dead bodies of the soldiers. There was still one corpse soldier alive, but Rolonia was using her whip to restrain it.

This is bad, Adlet thought.

Rolonia didn't have any weapons besides that whip. If she were to be attacked right now, she would have no way of defending herself.

As panic gripped Adlet, he noticed what looked like an old woman moving towards Rolonia. *Maybe she's not an enemy*, he wondered for a moment, since he didn't see any kind of parasite on the back of that woman's neck. However there was no way that an old woman should be where they were.

But most importantly, Rolonia was heading into a trap, and anyone who resembled an enemy had to be taken out.

"Rolonia! Get away from her!" Adlet shouted.

The old woman was already close to Rolonia, and to make matters worse, it didn't seem like Rolonia was cautious about her at all. Out of options, Adlet threw a paralyzing dart at the old woman. Whether she was a human or a Kyoma, it would have no problems stopping her from moving.

But then the worst possible situation he could imagine happened.

"Wait Ad-kun!" Rolonia shouted and leaped in front of the dart.

The dart cut open Rolonia's wrist, and in the blink of an eye, the energy drained from her body. As her legs lost the power to support her body, her whip slipped out of her hand.

"Now!" The old woman shouted, and a snake Kyoma with five heads sprung up from the ground.

"...Huh?" Rolonia mumbled through lips that struggled to move.

Without any time for Adlet to shout for her to run, the snake Kyoma coiled about Rolonia's body.

Rolonia tried to reach for the handle of her whip that was restraining the corpse soldier, but before her fingers could reach it, the old woman snatched it away.

"Kill her!"

The corpse soldier stood to its feet and swung its hands down towards Rolonia's face.

"I won't let you hurt her!" Adlet shouted.

Before the corpse soldier's fists hit Rolonia, Adlet shot out the blade of his sword, and it stabbed through the corpse soldier's face.

Seeing the corpse soldier die, the woman ran away screaming, "Come, now! This is our only chance!"

The ground at Rolonia's feet then swelled up, and corpse soldiers jumped out from the dirt. After that, dozens of corpse soldiers came running out from the cave. And though Adlet had no idea where they had been hiding, several corpse soldiers came rushing towards them from the forest.

"Why...Why...why?!" Rolonia muttered.

With her body paralyzed and her whip stolen, Rolonia was not in any position to fight.

I have to kill that snake Kyoma, Adlet decided, until he realized his fatal mistake. The anti-Kyoma weapon, the Stake of the Saints, was still in his iron box. He had thought he wouldn't need it since they were fighting corpse soldiers, so he had prioritized the smoke pellets and other equipment.

"Run, Rolonia! Run!"

"No, get... Get back!" Rolonia shouted from the ground as blood shot out from her wrist and showered down on the snake Kyoma. It shrieked and convulsed in pain, but it continued to barrel down towards Rolonia.

Adlet threw all of the bombs he had left at the approaching corpse soldiers, but he was completely surrounded, and he didn't have enough to hit them all.

"Gaa!" A single corpse soldier attacked Adlet from behind and grazed his back, causing him to gasp sharply. At the same time, five more corpse soldiers that had avoided the bombs were heading right for the motionless Rolonia.

This can't be real, Adlet thought. Am I going to lose a friend in a place like this? To a single worthless Kyoma? All because of some obvious trap?

Why? Why did I let Rolonia go off on her own? Why didn't I trust her? If I had been with her, she would never have fallen into so simple a trap as this.

"Rolonia!!!!" Adlet screamed.

Drowning in fear, Rolonia shut her eyes and waited for the inevitable.

Then a light flashed all around Rolonia.

The next instant, the necks and arms of the corpse soldiers that were trying to rush towards her were cut off and danced through the air, and the snake Kyoma that was restraining Rolonia was also sliced into pieces.

"...Huh?" Rolonia uttered, still barely able to move her mouth.

A single corpse soldier was holding swords in both of its hands. It reached down and patted Rolonia's head before turning around to Adlet.



"Umeow. What are you doing, Adlet? Protecting your companions is your job, meow."

"...Hans...-san?" Rolonia asked, her face completely pale and her voice trembling.

Covered in dirt and wearing shredded clothes, Hans smiled.

#

The remaining dozens of corpse soldiers were soon taken care of. Hans was responsible for killing most of them, whereas Adlet wasn't able to do anything but assist him while Rolonia just stared in shock.

Hans dodged the corpse soldiers with grace, as if he was predicting each of their attacks, and then he would end their lives with a precise strike from his sword. It was like watching a masterful and well-rehearsed dance. Hans had only been fighting with the corpse soldiers for little under three hours, yet in that short time he had come to perfectly understand how they behaved and fought.

Beyond his inhuman physical talent and specialized swordplay, his superior ability to learn might have been Hans' greatest weapon.

Soon the area went quiet. It seemed like all the corpse soldiers that had been dispatched for the trap had been dealt with. No longer in danger, Adlet shifted his focus back to Rolonia and helped her up to her feet.

Fortunately, she didn't have any serious injuries. Adlet then yanked out the sword lodged in the head of the corpse soldier he'd killed to save Rolonia and inserted it back into its sheathe.

"There was no leech Kyoma..." Rolonia said as she touched the corpse soldier's body. "It was...a lie."

Rolonia hung her head.

"Why.... She was human.... Why?"

Adlet spotted a corpse at the top of the ridge. The old woman that had deceived Rolonia was lying on the ground. Adlet approached her just to make sure, but it was indeed the old woman and she was already dead. It looked like she had been killed by the corpse soldiers.

Adlet didn't know why she had participated in luring the Flowers into a trap. As far as he could see, it didn't appear that her family had been taken hostage. It could be that she was trying to guarantee her survival if the world were annihilated. Or maybe she was just being forced to stay alive through some Kyoma's power.

It doesn't really matter, Adlet decided and turned his attention to Hans.

"Hans, how did you know that Rolonia would be here?" Adlet asked, staring at Hans.

Hans' disguise was quite impressive. His hair and his clothes were covered in dirt. One part of his body was discolored after being rubbed with some rotten flesh, and he had probably gotten his clothing from another corpse soldier. Plus, he had a dead parasite tied to the back of his neck with some string, the same string that he'd gotten from Adlet's iron box. From the beginning, he had planned to disguise himself as one of the corpse soldiers.

"Meowhi. I thought it would end up like this one way or another."

That wasn't an answer, Adlet thought.

"Thank you....very much, Hans-san."

Hans shrugged.

"You were easily tricked, meow. I thought you were an idiot before, but you're even more of an idiot than I could've imagined, meow."

"...I..."

Adlet looked to Rolonia. He had no intention of getting angry with her. The entire time, she had been thinking of him. Everything she had done was because she couldn't bear to see Adlet suffering.

"Adlet, does it look like Number 9 has been killed, meow?"

"We've been driving it towards the mountain, but I think there's still time left until it's in position. I'm also worried about Chamo, so let's head back," Adlet replied and started to run, taking Rolonia with him.

But as they moved, Adlet realized something wasn't quite right. He remembered the cloth he had seen floating in the air earlier.

"Hans. Did you throw some cloth into the air?"

"What are you talking about, meow?"

Rolonia also seemed like she didn't know. *If that's so, then who threw that cloth? Maybe it ripped off by accident and flew into the air. Is that likely?* It was a small point, but something about it weighed on Adlet's mind.

"Ad-kun, Hans-san."

Rolonia had been running behind Adlet and Hans, but suddenly she stopped. It looked like she was thinking about something. With a serious look, she pleaded with both of them.

"I've caused trouble for both of you....and for that I am truly sorry. But...please listen to just....one more thing.

"What's the matter?" Hans asked.

"I have something I'd like you to look at."

Rolonia walked around in search of something and eventually stopped at a fallen corpse soldier. She lifted up its left arm and Adlet and Hans both read the words that were carved into its skin.

"Look for me and help. The man with words on his right arm knows about Tgurneu's secret."

"There are people among the corpse soldiers who have words on their arms."

"I see, meow, Rolonia. One of the corpse soldier guys is alive, and he knows about Tgurneu's secret weapon." Though Hans was smiling, there seemed to be a slight anger burning within his eyes. "Have you lost your memory or something? Have you already forgotten how you were just tricked and nearly killed?"

"No, you're wrong," Adlet said. He looked again at the words. Then he recalled the event from earlier: around the place where the cloth was floating about in the air, there was a tree with what looked like words carved into the bark.

He got the feeling that those words and the words that were written on the arms of the corpse soldiers were similar.

"That old woman who tricked me, she didn't know about the words on the corpse soldiers or Tgurneu's secret weapon."

"...umeow? What does that mean?"

"They are different. The person who wrote these words and the people that tricked me are different. Clearly, Tgurneu deceived me. However, there is still another person who left behind these messages."

"Rolonia... That can't be true," Hans said.

"Someone is alive among the corpse soldiers. And they know about Tgurneu's secret weapon!"

"There's no way. You know that isn't possible," Hans replied.

"I think it's true," Adlet cut in, putting a stop to Hans' opposition. Hans didn't reply, but just looked Adlet in the eyes suspiciously. "I saw it too," Adlet continued. "What Rolonia is saying isn't a lie."

Adlet then started to run.

"One of the corpse soldiers is alive! It's the corpse soldier with writing on its right arm!"

#

But at that same time, Raina fell down to the damp earth and looked up to the heavens. He could see the blue sky through the gaps in the canopy of trees above.

His body wasn't moving anymore; the parasite had relinquished control.

...It's over, Raina thought.

The old woman who had told him the truth about the Black Barren Flower floated in the back of his mind.

I'm sorry, miss. It was no use. I tried my best, but it was no good.

A number of mysterious Kyoma and dozens of corpse soldiers were fighting around him, but the shrieks from both groups seemed to be getting farther and farther away.

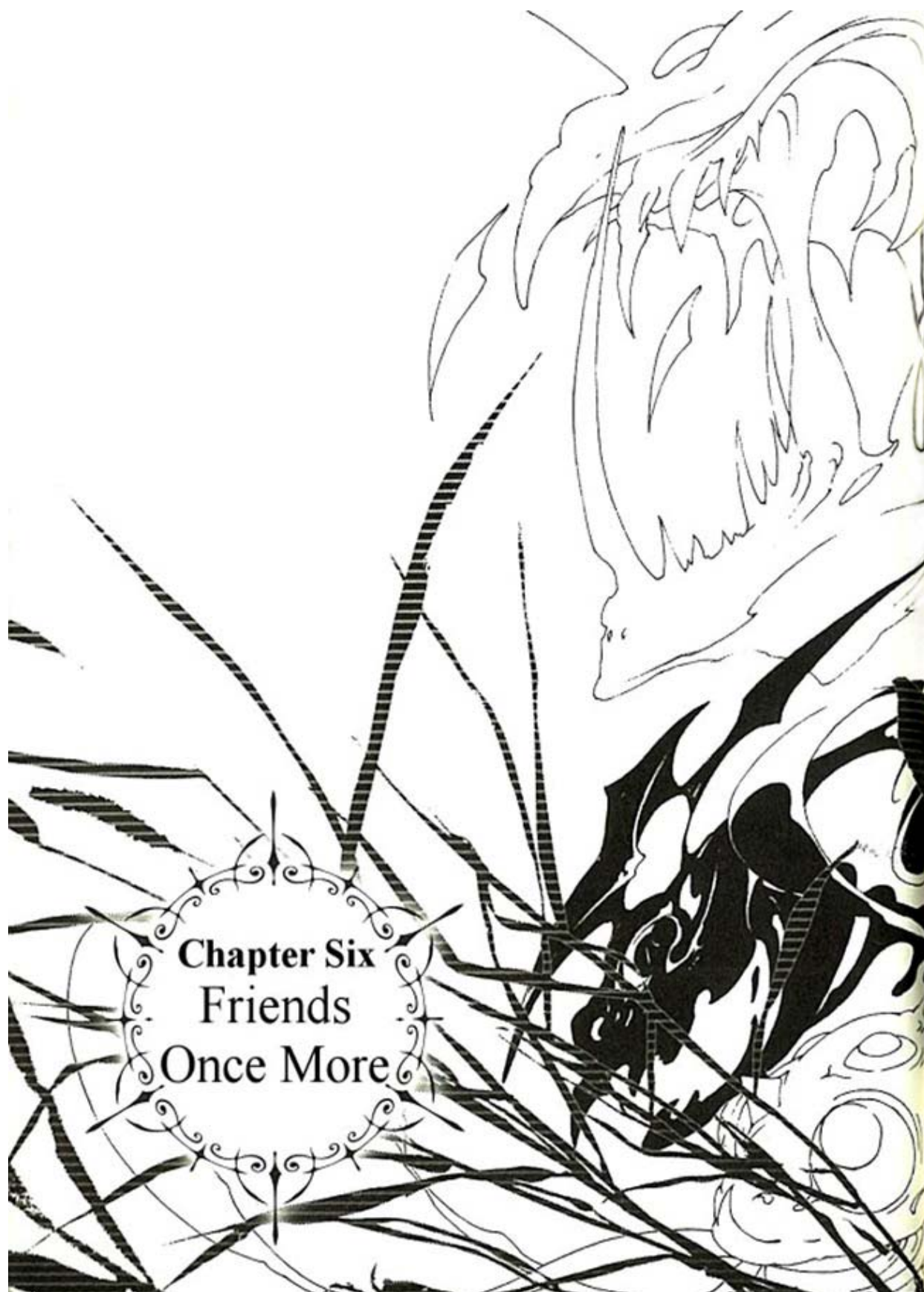
Raina had once again regained control of his left arm, but he didn't even try to move it anymore.

Adlet's face appeared in his mind, and within his heart, he called out to his friend who was living out there somewhere in the world.

Adlet, I wasn't a hero. I was just a worthless man.

Raina couldn't move anymore; both of his legs had been broken. But even worse than that, he had lost the only proof that could show that he was alive.

His right arm had been ripped off completely.





Chapter Six: Part One

"Idiot, idiot, idiot, idiot, idiot!" Chamo spat as she fought the corpse soldiers.

She's just like Rolonia, Goldof thought.

Even though the Jyuma were spread out across the forest, each time Chamo moved her index finger, they would all move at once. They confronted the attacking corpse soldiers and spewed noxious acid to break their formations.

"What is Adlet thinking? Chamo is gonna kill that stupid cow!"

The three humans and Dozzu continued their assault on the corpse soldiers surrounding the Dark Specialist. They were already next to the mountain where Fremy and Mora were waiting, which meant the time for developing their strategy had passed. However, the situation wasn't the most ideal. The hole left by Rolonia's absence, to say nothing of Adlet's, was huge, and Goldof had no choice but to make up for them.

Goldof pushed forward, using his spear to knock down anyone who stood in his way. He had come to somewhat understand the corpse soldiers' behavior, so he was able to predict their movements as he bore down on the Dark Specialist.

"Dog-san! If you come any closer, Chamo will kill you!" Chamo shouted from behind him.

Dozzu, who had been supporting Goldof by picking off soldiers with his electric strikes, distanced himself from Chamo in a panic. It was very likely that Chamo would really kill him.

As they fought, Goldof was keeping an eye on Nashetania and Dozzu. As Adlet had said, it wasn't unreasonable to think the two of them would seize this opportunity to kill Chamo, and Goldof was the only one who could protect her. His vigilance was both for Chamo's benefit and Nashetania's.

Nashetania laughed while conjuring blades from the ground. It didn't seem like she was concerned about Goldof at all.

"Haaa!" Nashetania used her swords to punch a hole in the enemy forces, and into that opening Goldof once again pushed forward.

I wonder if Rolonia is safe, Goldof thought. Earlier, Adlet had run after her. If he was with her, then the worst case scenario probably wouldn't happen. However, Goldof couldn't deny the possibility that Adlet was actually the seventh.

What is Hans doing? I wonder if Fremy and Mora are safe. And where is Tgurneu right now? Goldof felt like his head was about to tear apart. There were way too many things that he had to worry about.

"Oaaa!"

But, for now, he had to focus on pushing the Dark Specialist into position. He would worry about Rolonia later.

#

While he ran through the forest, Adlet thought about how he would search for the corpse soldier with the writing on its right arm.

"Umeow. Are you serious, Adlet?" Hans asked from behind him.

"Yeah, I'm serious. There's someone alive among the corpse soldiers. And they know about Tgurneu's secret weapon."

"I, meow, don't buy it," Hans said.

Understandable. If someone viewed the situation from a sensible point of view, they would see that the possibility of there being a living corpse soldier seemed unlikely.

"I saw it. There were things carved into the trunk of a tree. It was the same unskilled, almost illegible scrawl written on that corpse soldier. So who wrote it? It wasn't one of the Flowers, nor was it a Kyoma. The only possibility is that it was one of the corpse soldiers."

"Meow..." Hans tilted his head to the side.

"You haven't seen it yet, so you probably wouldn't know, but the only thing that the enemy has been trying to do is lure Rolonia to the cave. They haven't said a word about the corpse soldier with words on his right arm. Doesn't that seem unnatural?"

"Meow, that may be so..."

The problem was whether or not to trust what Rolonia was saying. *I can believe her*, Adlet decided. She had fallen into a trap and definitely been within moments of being killed. If Hans hadn't come in time, she would have definitely died. There was no way she was the seventh.

But above everything else, Rolonia had fought for Adlet. How could he not trust her?

"I understand, meow. I'll follow your decision."

Adlet looked over to Rolonia.

"Rolonia. Can you help the corpse soldiers by yourself?"

"I think I can do it. If they aren't dead yet.... No, I can definitely do it."

Tgurneu's main forces had only reached as far as the southern mountains, so there was probably still time. They would defeat Dark Specialist Number 9, head to the Temple of Fate, and, after finding the corpse soldier in question, they would figure out what to do at the temple.

Adlet was worried about Chamo being left all by herself with Dozzu and Nashetania, but Goldof would most likely protect her. And it didn't seem like Chamo could be killed so easily, even by opponents such as Nashetania or Dozzu. So Adlet decided he should prioritize finding the corpse soldier.

"Hold up a sec. What if what you're saying is true?" Hans said, spreading his hands out wide. "How will you find them?"

Right then they heard the screams of corpse soldiers coming from directly in front of them. Three corpse soldiers scurried into their path. Hans jumped through the air, as if it were a dance, and Adlet and Rolonia prepared their weapons. However, before Hans could reach the soldiers, their bodies twisted simultaneously, as if they had been struck by lightning. Then they started to scream in agony as their bodies contorted violently. Most unsettlingly, their screams weren't the only ones they heard. The Heroes could hear screams echoing throughout the entire forest.

"What's going on, meow?" Hans asked, spinning around to check the surroundings.

However, within a moment Adlet had already figured it out.

Fremy had killed Number 9.

#

Goldof rammed through the onslaught of corpse soldiers, not flinching an inch as the corpses' attacks struck his armor. The corpse soldiers fought with all of their strength, which Goldof was using against them. He redirected their momentum as they attacked, and caused them to lose their balance and crash into the other corpse soldiers.

Inside Goldof's head he was chuckling at Number 9. The Kyoma had sensed danger and turned and fled, but the safety it was seeking would actually be its downfall. The entire battle, the Heroes had managed to keep the Kyoma in the dark about the plan for Fremy to snipe it, and it had no clue that Mora and Fremy were waiting just ahead of it on the mountain. Thus, the unsuspecting Dark Specialist ran right into position, and the battle entered its final stage.

However, instead of signaling Fremy, Goldof turned around and shouted, "Princess, I'll leave this area to you. Please head this way! You too, Chamo!"

There was still a chance that Fremy was the seventh, which meant it was very possible that after dispatching with Mora, Fremy might pick off her companions one by one as they had their guard down. Goldof wasn't that worried about himself because he was confident that he could withstand one shot, and he didn't really care if Dozzu died.

"We understand, Goldof," Nashetania said.

"Why are you commanding Chamo?"

As Goldof ordered, the two of them headed away from the front lines. Dozzu then glanced at Goldof and, probably guessing Goldof's intentions, nodded. Now all Goldof had to do was wait for Fremy's shot.

And whether Fremy was really an ally or not completely depended on what she did next.

#

Mora and Fremy both waited with anticipation within the overgrowth at the center of a small mountain, from where they could see the entire north foot of the mountain. They were already starting to hear the sounds coming from the fight between Chamo, Dozzu, and the others with the Kyoma.

With the power of her second sight, Mora was completely aware of everything happening on the small mountain. Although she was sure Adlet and the others were fighting with Number 9, at the moment, she couldn't see any corpse soldiers on the mountain. However, a number of them were searching around the area.

"Mora, don't move. We'll be spotted."

The two of them were sitting huddled together. They had dug holes into the ground and were waiting in them with branches and leaves to conceal them. *This kind of camouflage is Fremy's area of expertise*, Mora noted. However, if the two of them were spotted, then their entire plan would come to nothing. So Mora tried to breathe as quietly as possible as she continued to watch the battle below.

Pushed back by Chamo and Goldof's attack, a large number of corpse soldiers were retreating to the center of the mountain. But Mora still hadn't seen anything that resembled how Number 9 had been described to her.

"This is strange," Fremy muttered.

"Adlet isn't with them. Neither is Rolonia."

Or at the very least, Adlet and Rolonia hadn't entered within the range of Mora's second sight. Through the gaps in the trees, she could faintly see some people fighting.

"Did something happen? Could it be the seventh...?"

"If something serious happened, then Adlet would have thrown up the firecracker and smoke bombs to tell us the plan was stopped. The only thing I'm certain of is that Adlet is still going through with the fight," Fremy replied.

"If that's so, then what's going on?"

"I don't know. We have no choice but to ask Chamo and the others."

Then we need to kill the Dark Specialist as soon as possible, Mora thought, just when she spotted the figure of a bony insect Kyoma with her second sight.

"It's here."

Though Mora's hands and face were covered with sweat, Fremy looked completely calm.

"What's its direction and course?"

"Looking straight out from our position, it's about twenty degrees to the left. It's heading for the summit and mostly moving in a straight line."

Fremy, with her rifle gripped in her hands, quietly closed her eyes. It didn't seem like she was aiming anymore.

"Fifteen corpse soldiers have assembled shoulder to shoulder and are moving with Number 9 at the center. And there are another fifty or so corpse soldiers surrounding the area around that group. It's like a wall. Right now the Jyuma are trying to get close, but they're being repelled."

"Where is Number 9 among the corpse soldiers?"

"It's roughly at the center. Maybe a little bit towards the back."

"Can you see where Number 9 is looking?"

Mora utilized her second sight to the fullest and stared right at the Dark Specialist, to the point where she could see that it had compound eyes on the part of its body that resembled a head, all of which were pointing in the same direction.

"Goldof. Number 9 is worried about his charge."

"That's enough," Fremy said and then stuck out her rifle from the branches and leaves.

Does she plan on taking it out with one shot? Mora wondered in shock.

The Dark Specialist was surrounded by a wall of Kyoma, and it didn't seem like Fremy would be able to get a clean shot. Unperturbed, Fremy removed a single strand of her hair and flicked it with her finger to check the condition of the wind.

Then she said quietly, "When Goldof starts his next charge, say, 'now'."

Goldof still hadn't entered into the range of Mora's second sight, so Mora stuck her head out of the hole and looked for their companions.

With a roar, Goldof rushed towards Number 9, his black armor standing out like a sore thumb as he swatted away the corpse soldiers in his path.

"Now."

After a single breath, fire erupted from Fremy's rifle.

With her second sight, Mora could see Number 9 lifted its head a bit above the wall of corpse soldiers when it heard Goldof shout. And in that moment Fremy shot a bullet through its face.

For a moment, all of the corpse soldiers stopped moving. But the very next instant, they all dropped to the ground and began to shriek and writhe about in agony.

"It looks like we succeeded," Fremy said as she loaded another bullet into her rifle. "You were a perfect help. Thanks to you, things went smoothly," Fremy added.

"Right. Now, more importantly, we should quickly regroup with the others. I'm worried about Adlet and Rolonia."

As if she realized that the fight was over, Chamo waved her hand in Mora's direction. Mora and Fremy both stood up and started down the mountain slope.

#

His right arm had been torn off and both of his legs were broken, and yet death still hadn't come for Raina. In fact, the bleeding from his right arm was already starting to slow. The parasite at the back of his neck seemed to have the power to prolong a corpse soldier's life, robbing the corpse soldiers of a peaceful death.

Why did I fail? Raina wondered as the pain wreaked havoc throughout his body. *Why, after going through so much to figure out the truth, was I unable to tell the Heroes about the Black Barren Flower?*

Heroes of the Six Flowers.... What happened to you?

Maybe now the world will come to an end. Or perhaps, despite everything, the Flowers can still manage to destroy the Black Barren Flower and secure their victory. Regardless of the future, Raina was sure of one thing. His long fight hadn't led to anything.

Please, Heroes...win for me. Protect the world and my friend.

What did I do wrong? What was I able to accomplish? Raina tossed those two questions about his head, but he eventually gave up because he simply couldn't come up with anything.

Everything is over. I wonder if the world will ever be good again.

I wasn't a Hero. I was nothing more than just an ordinary, good-for-nothing human. Wasn't that obvious from the beginning?

Then a horrific pain exploded at the back of his neck. His mouth involuntarily let out a shriek, and his body thrashed on the ground. At the edge of his vision he could see that the other corpse soldiers seemed to be suffering in the same way.

After a few moments, he realized what had happened. The Heroes of the Six Flowers had killed the Kyoma that was controlling the corpse soldiers.

At the same time, he also came to the solemn conclusion, *I'll probably die soon.*

He could feel his body again, and once again, he was able to move his left arm. The effect of the Dark Specialist's death had already extended to him. But even so, it didn't matter anymore. He had lost his right arm with the writing, and so it was impossible for the Heroes to find him.

#

The wails of the corpse soldiers completely enveloped the forest. Adlet and his companions stopped to listen, and a cold sweat started to bead on Adlet's forehead.

"They succeeded, as usual," Adlet muttered, referring to Fremy and the others. "I just wish they had waited a little longer."

This is definitely some bad luck. If Dozzu's explanation is correct, then all of the corpse soldiers will die in just 15 minutes.

Would the corpse soldier who knew about Tgurneu's trump card survive the death of Number 9? Adlet had no idea, but the chance of that being the case seemed exceedingly low.

"...We have to find them quickly. Or we'll never know what Tgurneu is planning," Rolonia said.

"Well, they might have been dead for a while now, meow."

Rolonia was about to run off, when Adlet shouted, "Wait! We'll never find them if we search blindly."

"Even though you're saying that, meow, do you have any leads?"

Adlet climbed up the highest tree near him, and when he reached the tip, he looked over the area. He strained his eyes, searching for any clue that the corpse soldier who knew about Tgurneu's plan may have left behind. Maybe there was something like the cloth that he'd seen in the air earlier, or something else. Anything, no matter how minor, would be helpful. Adlet prayed that some kind of clue had been left behind for them.

But he couldn't find anything.

"...What should we do?"

The corpse soldiers were scattered throughout the vast forest. Within 15 minutes they could probably locate one of them, but happening across the one in question was simply impossible.

What if we make Chamo's Jyuma search for them? Adlet thought. But before they could reach Chamo's location and tell her what was going on, it would be too late.

"Chamo! Fremy! Mora! Goldof! Can you hear me?" Adlet shouted from the tree top.

"Find the corpse soldier with writing on its right arm!"

But the cries of the corpse soldiers were so loud that they utterly drowned out Adlet's voice. No matter how hard he shouted, his voice was never going to reach the others.

Adlet frantically racked his brain for ideas. In his mind, he saw the cloth that had been thrown into the air and the words that had been carved into the tree. Those were clues left behind by the corpse soldier who knew Tgurneu's secret. They couldn't be anything else.

A while earlier, the corpse soldier in question had been at those locations, and yet those were the only clues. *Can I pinpoint his location with such small pieces of information?*

"...No, it's not a question of whether I can do it or not."

I absolutely can do it. That, he believed. If I am the strongest man in the world, then it can't be impossible.

So Adlet continued to think at the top of the tree.

#

Raina's body twisted and jerked as groans of pain continued to spill from his mouth. He wasn't alone; all of the other corpse soldiers had collapsed to the ground and were suffering just like he was. However, despite the outward display of agony, Raina's mind was at peace.

Random memories popped up in the back of his thoughts. He'd heard that when death was close, people saw visions from their pasts just like this.

He was remembering his home village.

The face of his first love, Shetra Maia, popped into his mind. Even though it had been 8 years now since she'd died, he remembered her as clearly as ever. He remembered her cheerful smile and the warmth he felt from just being by her side.

At the harvest at the end of autumn, the village held a lively festival in the square. People would sing there together, and it was always the same song. They would sing it every single year over and over again, but they never once got sick of it. Though after coming to the Wailing Demon Territory, none of them ever sang it again.

The faces of the deceived villagers floated by in his mind. None of them were bad people. Even their killing of Shetra and their attempts to kill Raina had been spurred on by fear. Tgurneu had pushed the villagers into those foolish mistakes. So Raina didn't hate them at all; he just felt sorry for them.

And then he recalled Adlet. He saw the face of his childhood friend from 8 years ago. Now he would be 18 years old, but Raina couldn't imagine Adlet as an adult no matter how hard he tried.

I want to see you again, Raina thought. Adlet, I want to see you again.

#

"Ad-kun! We need to hurry and search!" Rolonia called up to Adlet from the forest floor.

However, Adlet didn't answer and continued to rack his brain for a solution.

The only things he knew for sure about the corpse soldier was that it could write and throw cloth. So from that, Adlet could surmise that the corpse soldier probably couldn't move on its own. If it could, then the moment the fighting started, the soldier would most likely have come to the Flowers. Writing and throwing things were about the most that it could do.

And though he didn't have any concrete evidence, there were some things that Adlet could guess from the past events. The corpse soldier had been trying to write. *'Don't be tricked'*. So in other words, it had known that Rolonia was being deceived. That meant it had been following Rolonia.

If the soldier was close to Rolonia, then it would have thrown the cloth at her and not into the air. Since it didn't, that must mean it had been a fair distance away from her.

"Rolonia! Before you went to the cave, were there corpse soldiers chasing after you?!"

"Um, yeah, there were!"

"What happened to them?"

"I lost most of them."

"Did any of the fallen soldiers have writing on them?"

"...Uh, no! I don't think so!" Rolonia replied hesitantly.

If what she said is true, then what did the corpse soldiers do after Rolonia slipped away?

Adlet thought back to each of the actions he'd seen the corpses take until that point.

One possibility was that they had joined the fight with Goldof and the others. Adlet had seen a lot of the soldiers running off in that direction. Or maybe it had chased after Adlet. After all, dozens of corpses had run after him. In fact, that option held the highest probability of being true. And another possibility was that the corpse soldier had been stopped by Chamo's Jyuma.

But which of the three was it? If the soldier had joined in the fight with Goldof and the others, then it would be at the south of the forest. If it had run after Adlet then it would be nearby. And it would be to the west if it had been fighting with the Jyuma.

"...Remember," Adlet muttered. There was a clue within his memories; he just had to find it.

Did any of the soldiers that came after me have writing on their right arm? Adlet couldn't recall. He felt like it was possible, but at the same time, he also got the feeling that he was mistaken. Truth be told, at that time he had only been thinking about helping Rolonia and hadn't paid any attention to the details of the soldiers' bodies.

"Ad-kun!" Rolonia shouted again.

There was little time left. He had no choice but to think on the run. Adlet scaled down the tree and motioned with his hand for Rolonia and Hans to follow him.

Adlet ran with everything he had, gasping for air but never stopping. Unable to keep up, Rolonia was left in the dust as Hans and Adlet tore through the forest.

At his side, Hans asked Adlet quietly, "Adlet, honestly, isn't this impossible?"

Adlet glared at Hans. "You idiot. How can we give up?" He could imagine all of the painful battles the corpse soldier had gone through just to tell them about Tgurneu's secret.

Adlet didn't know how the corpse soldier knew about Tgurneu's plan, but that soldier had fought with all their strength to try and tell the Heroes. It had written on the bodies of corpse soldiers and thrown messages on cloth. As small as those actions seemed, perhaps it had taken everything the corpse soldier had to accomplish that.

The corpse soldier was trying to tell the truth about Tgurneu's secret weapon. How could they not respond to it?

But where in the forest should I search? Time was running out, and Adlet couldn't afford to make a mistake.

#

Raina's consciousness was slowly falling into darkness, and bit by bit his strength was leaving his writhing body. There was still a groan coming out from his mouth, but that too was getting quieter and quieter.

I should sleep already. I should just forget everything and sleep.

The moment Raina thought that, he heard a voice that pulled him back from the clutches of unconsciousness.

"Is someone alive out there?"

#

"Is someone alive out there?" Adlet shouted, to the point where his throat was raw and it felt like blood was coming up from his throat.

Adlet had chosen the west part of the forest, and now they were at the place where Chamo's Jyuma had fought with the corpse soldiers. But there were less than 5 minutes left.

The clue he had based his decision on was a tiny detail: when he had been searching for Rolonia earlier, he had seen some Jyuma eating corpse soldiers and a piece of cloth hanging from one of the tree branches.

When Adlet had first seen it fluttering at the edge of his vision, he didn't think anything of it. But now he realized that the cloth had been thrown by the corpse soldier who knew about Tgurneu's weapon. The soldier had thrown it up into the air as a way to convey to the Heroes that it was alive.

It was far too minor to call proof. However, at the moment, Adlet had no choice but to bet on that chance.

"If there is someone alive, then give us a sign! Tell us about Tgurneu's secret weapon!"

Chamo's Jyuma were all gone, but the scene they left behind was pure hell. The corpse soldiers that had been killed by the Jyuma were scattered all over the place, and even the living soldiers were just writhing and groaning in agony.

While Adlet called out to the living corpse soldier, he looked to each one of the fallen corpses. One by one he lifted up their right arms and searched for any kind of writing.

"Is there a corpse soldier that has information about some secret entrance, Tgurneu's core, or Nashetania?" Hans asked as he started to go around just like Adlet and search the corpses' right arms for writing.

"We've been doing nothing but searching since we came here, meow," Hans grumbled.

Ignoring him, Adlet continued to investigate the corpses.

Then he found a piece of torn cloth hanging from a tree limb. The cloth had an unnatural look, as if it had been ripped off during battle. *So I was right.*

Rolonia finally caught up with them and joined them in their search, even though she was panting heavily from the run.

But there were far too many soldiers, and the area where Chamo's Jyuma had been fighting was vast. Plus, their time was dwindling fast.

"Are you not here? Give us a sign! Is there anyone alive here?!" Adlet shouted.

But even as he looked over the surroundings, he didn't spot anyone.

#

They came. They finally came looking for me.

For a moment Raina felt overjoyed as he listened to their voices, but soon despair and resignation took over his heart. They were late, and he no longer had his right arm with the writing on it, which was the only mark he had for them to locate him.

Raina's body was still moving about and groaning in agony, but his consciousness was already going blank.

"Are you not here? Give us sign! Is there anyone alive here?"

The Heroes of the Six Flowers were calling out to him. Raina weakly lifted up his left arm and waved his hand. However there were tons of corpse soldiers writhing around him. Raina's wave simply blended in with the movements of all the others. Plus, they had way too much ground to cover, and at the moment they weren't even getting close to Raina.

"Is there someone alive? Anyone alive at all?"

Raina heard their shouts, but he was thinking, *It's already no use, Heroes of the Six Flowers. You're all too late.*

Raina badly wanted to sleep. His consciousness was slowly fading away, and Raina simply didn't have the strength to fight anymore. Completely drained, his left arm dropped to the ground.

"Umeow! Respond, meow!"

That was probably the swordsman with the disheveled hair he'd encountered first.

"Is there someone alive?! We have come to help you!"

And that was probably the voice of the armored girl. But neither of their words punched through the fog in Raina's mind.

But then Raina heard the voice of another of the Heroes.

"Don't give up! If you're alive, then please don't give up!"

...That's strange, Raina thought.

Hearing that man's voice made him feel the need to keep fighting. The man's voice made him feel like he couldn't give up yet.

"The Strongest Man in the World has come! I will definitely find you, so don't give up!"

That's a strange guy, Raina thought. However, what was stranger still was that when he listened to that man's voice, Adlet's face appeared in his mind.

I....will not give up, Adlet, Raina remembered. Once, he had promised that he would become one of the Heroes of the Six Flowers. He had told his only close friend that he himself was a Hero. And Heroes would never give up.

That's why they were Heroes.

Think. There has to be a way to tell the Flowers that I'm alive.

He couldn't get their attention with his hand, and writing something was equally meaningless since he would probably die before the Heroes found the words.

He had no choice but to call out to them, but the only thing coming out of his mouth were groans of agony. He had control of his left arm again, but he couldn't get his tongue, lips, or throat to move.

There has to be a way, right?

Chapter Six: Part Two

"Huh?"

Adlet's hands came to a stop, and he halted his search. He had heard something. He didn't know what it was, but he had definitely heard something important.

"What's the matter, Ad-kun?"

He ignored her, cupped his ears, and focused all his energy on listening. Amidst the sea of corpse soldier cries, another sound drifted in the air.

"...A song?" Adlet muttered.

It was the song that was sung on the day of the festival at his destroyed village. It was only for a moment, and Adlet hadn't been able to make out the words, but he was sure it was the song of his hometown.

Without another moment of hesitation, Adlet ran as hard as he could in the direction of that song.

#

Raina was holding his throat. The groans were still spilling out from his mouth, but when he pressed his windpipe upwards it produced a high pitch, and when he pressed down on it, a slightly lower pitch would come out. Desperately, Raina used his left hand to manipulate his throat into emulating singing. The intervals and the pitch were off, and if he was being honest with himself, it was barely recognizable as a song. Nevertheless, Raina continued to sing.

Raina remembered back in the day when Adlet simply couldn't get the hang of singing. At that time, Raina had grabbed Adlet's throat in the same way to change his pitch. Most likely, Adlet wouldn't have been able to sing a single proper note without Raina's intervention.

Six Flowers... Can you hear me?

He couldn't speak, nor create any kind of signal to get their attention. The only thing he could do now was sing.

#

With each step the sound grew clearer and clearer, and soon Adlet was positive it was the song from his village. Through all the interference of the corpse soldiers' cries, he could distinctly hear the nostalgic melody. For an instant, Adlet completely forgot about his companions, about the Majin, and even about the Black Barren Flower.

"Where...." he muttered.

The singing must be coming from the corpse soldier that knew about Tgurneu's trump card, and that person was someone from his village. So Adlet ran, relying on the singing voice to guide him. It didn't take long before he spotted a corpse soldier grabbing its own throat.

There's no way I would have found them without the song, Adlet thought as he realized the corpse soldier was missing its right arm.

"Is it you?" Adlet asked as he stepped closer, before exclaiming, "It is you!" Adlet dropped down and clung to the corpse soldier's body. Its body temperature was already starting to drop. And to make matters worse, there was a high chance it would die from its severe injuries without immediate first aid.

The corpse soldier's hand that was gripping its throat slowly dropped.

"Rolonia! Come over here! Hurry! Hurry up!" Adlet shouted.

Rolonia hurried over from where she had been searching.

"Stay with me! Help is here! Hold on!"

It already seemed like the corpse soldier wasn't able to hear them anymore, and its eyes just stared blankly at nothing.

Adlet shouted at the soldier again, but his heart wasn't filled with the desire to learn Tgurneu's secret. For so long, Adlet had believed he would never see anyone from his home again. But now that he was face to face with one of his villagers, joy flooded through his body.

But who is this corpse soldier? Adlet wondered as he stared at their face. The corpse soldier was young, about the same age as Adlet, but there shouldn't have been any men in his village that were the same age as him. At least not anymore.

"....No, it couldn't be."

"Ad-kun! Get out of the way!"

Rolonia came barreling over and pushed Adlet aside to sit next to the corpse soldier. She sealed up the area where his right arm had been removed, and then she placed her hand on the ground soaked with his blood. Using her ability, she pulled the blood up from the ground and shaped it into a solid globe before returning it to the corpse soldier's body. Immediately after that, she bit into the parasite on the back of its neck and paralyzed it. With the creature inactive, she carefully extracted it from the soldier's body.

I can't believe it. He was alive? Adlet thought as he watched her work.

Adlet reached out to the corpse soldier's long, unkempt hair. And when he lifted it up he saw a scar on his forehead. He could never forget that scar. It was the same scar that Adlet had given Raina when they were young.

"You were...alive...Raina?"

Adlet crumpled to his knees. All this time, he had wanted to see him again. All this time, he had wanted to say thanks for helping him. He had wanted to apologize for being the only one who had managed to escape.

"This isn't true. Raina, this...this isn't possible."

While Adlet sat there, a storm of emotions swirling about in his mind, Hans approached from behind. It only took him a moment to surmise what was happening from Adlet's behavior.

"It looks like we helped a guy from your village."

Adlet couldn't say anything. Instead Rolonia answered.

"...I don't know yet. He's used up a lot of his life force...."

Silently, she continued to pull out the parasite until every bit of the tentacles had been removed.

"Raina! You were alive?! It's me! Adlet!"

Adlet tried to wake Raina up, but he didn't react. Rolonia placed her hand on his chest and began to use her power to treat him. It seemed like his healing still wasn't complete.

"Adlet, calm down, meow. You'll make Rolonia mess up."

Adlet came back to his senses and waited still for Rolonia to finish her treatment.

Help him, please, Adlet prayed. He is my only friend.

As if in response to Adlet's prayer, Raina's mouth opened. "Tgur...."

Raina's voice stopped, a wheezing sound coming up from his throat. His bone-dry mouth couldn't say anything.

"Ad-kun, water."

Adlet nodded, took out his canteen, and poured water into Raina's mouth. Once the canteen was empty, Raina again tried to speak.

"Heroes of the... Six Flowers, listen... Tgurneu..."

"Raina, it's me. Do you understand? It's Adlet."

Again, Adlet clung to Raina's body, and again he was stopped by Hans.

"First let's hear him out, meow. You can enjoy your reunion later."

Hans was right. Raina had fought to tell them about the existence of Tgurneu's secret weapon. They had to hear what he had to say first.

"The Temple of Fate... was built. From the Saint of the Single Flower... because the power was stolen... temple."

Rolonia was giving everything she had to heal Raina's body, but from the look on her face, Adlet could tell things weren't going very well. Adlet strained his ears and kept listening to Raina's words.

"From the Saint of the Single Flower... power stolen... Saint Instrument... Black Barren Flower... created."

Adlet, Rolonia, and Hans all gulped at the same time. They were pursuing the Black Barren Flower, and somehow Raina knew about it. Adlet wanted to ask him how he'd gotten that information, but now wasn't the time.

"The Saint of the Single Flower... remaining power... The Black Barren Flower... absorb... in order to defeat... the Majin... power to manipulate fate... power to defend against poison everything... Black Barren Flower... absorbed all power... crests eliminate..."

Blood dripped down from the side of Raina's mouth, but before any of them could react, Raina added, "Kill the Black Barren Flower before all of the power is absorbed."

"Did you say kill? What do you mean, Raina?" Adlet asked, but Raina couldn't hear him.

"The Six Flowers... The Land of Fallen Tears... the closer they get...the Black Barren Flower... power will increase... before fighting the Majin... kill the Black Barren Flower... Sooner or later... will come close to the Six Flowers... if they don't come close to the Six Flowers... can't absorb the power of the crests...."

Adlet could see that Raina's strength was leaving his body by the second. Rolonia hadn't stopped trying to heal him, but it was too late.

He wanted to shout for Raina to stop talking, but he knew that was something he couldn't allow. What Raina was trying to say was information that would influence the fate of the world, and he had risked his life to tell it.

"The Black Barren Flower..."

Raina's voice was getting quieter and quieter. They had to lean so close that their ears were nearly touching his mouth to hear him.

"The Black... Barren Flower..."

The three of them listened to what Raina said next, and Adlet's face went white. Both Rolonia's and Hans' eyes shot wide open, and their gazes met in shock.

"Raina, is this true? What in the world does it mean?"

Adlet's heart was racing and his teeth were chattering. He couldn't believe what Raina had said.

Adlet shook Raina, but the moment his hands touched his skin, Adlet knew that all the energy had left Raina's body.

"Don't die; you can't die yet, Raina! Wake up! Open your eyes!"

Rolonia gritted her teeth and continued to use her healing abilities. However, she was already pouring all of her energy into his treatment and it wasn't enough.

He had to ask in more detail about what he'd just heard, but at the same time, he felt it was more important to help Raina. He had to bring Raina back to the human world and take him back home to their village.

Despite everything, though, Raina seemed relaxed. It was as if his face were saying 'I have nothing left to do'.

"Don't make faces like that, Raina. Let's go home, let's go home together, Raina."

Is this real? Adlet wondered. Even though he was alive all this time and struggled for so long, and even after all the effort he went through to be able to see me again, is it really going to end like this?

"Next time I'll teach you how to use a sword. You'll be surprised how strong I've become," Adlet said to his friend.

And then Raina's eyes opened and looked up at Adlet's face.

#

He had made it to the Flowers and told them about the Black Barren Flower. He hadn't been able to tell them everything, but maybe it had been enough. But though he had done everything he needed to, Raina's heart wasn't filled with joy. It was filled with the relief of knowing that it was now okay for him to sleep. His body was battered and broken, and he was beyond exhausted.

But before he could fall asleep, Raina called out to his friend in his mind.

Hey, it's just as you said, Adlet. I really was a Hero.

I helped the Heroes of the Six Flowers. I saved them from the danger of total annihilation, and now they'll definitely defeat the Black Barren Flower. They'll safely reach the Land of Fallen Tears, defeat the Majin, and save the world for me.

There's no way they could have done any of that without me.

Perhaps I was the only person in the world who could have done something like this, Raina wondered as a sense of accomplishment blossomed within his chest.

But as he was slowly falling into the clutches of sleep, someone grabbed Raina and shook him. Raina couldn't make out what he was saying, but the guy was definitely speaking to him. Raina slowly opened his eyes and looked at his face.

...Haha, that's hilarious. Raina thought.

"Hey... you... you look like my friend," Raina said, and then his eyes slowly fell back shut.

#

"...Raina."

Frozen on the ground, Adlet silently held onto the still body of his friend. Quietly, Rolonia took her hand away from Raina's chest. There was no longer anything she could do.

Adlet stared at Raina's corpse in shock.

"Was he your friend, Ad-kun?"

Adlet nodded slightly.

"I'm sorry, Ad-kun. I couldn't help him," she whispered.

"So now, as we're going to find out about the Black Barren Flower, we've heard something preposterous, meow. If it's true... that would be a serious problem," Hans said.

But Rolonia still couldn't think about that. The regret of not being able to help anyone welled up in her chest until it bubbled over and spilled down her face as tears. She had wanted to help the corpse soldiers. Even one would have been okay, because then Adlet would have still been able to be together again with someone from his hometown.

I didn't fight all this way for this.... If I had just acted faster, or been more careful and observed the corpse soldiers more closely, then I might have been able to save Raina.

Rolonia had never regretted her own stupidity more than she did now. In her heart she apologized to the corpse soldiers and Raina over and over again.

I'm sorry that I wasn't able to help you.

"Rolonia, how is crying supposed to help?" Adlet said.

Rolonia hurriedly wiped away her tears.

"But you were right, Rolonia; you were the only one who was right. Me and the others had thought we needed to abandon the corpse soldiers. The fact that I didn't realize what was going on is shameful."

"...Ad-kun."

"Thank you, Rolonia. I'm really glad that you're here with us."

Rolonia dropped her head. His words were painful to hear. She knew that, as he spoke, he was fighting back the urge to cry himself. And now with Raina gone, he felt truly alone.

Adlet suddenly drew his sword and called out to Raina's dead body.

"I'm sorry, Raina. I couldn't save you. But your efforts will not be wasted. So... we shall fight together."

Adlet cut off a lock of Raina's hair, then coiled it up and stashed it in one of the pouches on his waist.

"Don't worry, Rolonia. I'm not lonely anymore. From now on, I'll always be with Raina."

Adlet stood and turned to Rolonia and Hans. "Let's go. First thing we should do is regroup with the others."

"It's alright to cry a little bit more," Hans said. "Fortunately, there don't seem to be any Kyoma coming."

"...If I have time to cry, then I'll fight. To carry on Raina's wishes, I will defeat the Majin and save the world. Because I am the Strongest Man in the World."

Adlet turned his back on the two of them and began to walk. But then his legs stopped.

"No... Actually, wait a second."

Adlet grabbed a nearby tree and pressed his face into the trunk. Then he started to silently weep.

Looking at his back as he cried against the tree, Rolonia thought, *I will be by your side as much as I can, and I will cheer you up and continue to support you. There is no way I can do anything very important, and I might just end up causing trouble for you. Even so, I vow to do my best.*

Even if you are the Strongest Man in the World, you can't survive all by yourself.

I don't want to make you cry ever again. I will protect you.

Chapter Six: Part Three

Meanwhile, Goldof was running through the forest behind Fremy, on their way to the cave Rolonia had been looking for. They weren't sure, but there was a chance that both Adlet and Rolonia were at the cave. Fremy hadn't been able to bear waiting for Adlet any longer and had gone off to search for him, though the others had already left the forest and were heading towards the Temple of Fate. The plan was to meet up after finding the two lost Heroes.

"Goldof, what does this mean?" she asked with a reproachful look. "Why did Rolonia act on her own? Why did she expose Adlet to danger?"

Would any explanation be good for you? Goldof wondered. If he explained poorly, Fremy would likely attack him. And in the worst case scenario, Nashetania's legs would be blown off.

"I will explain. That is, after we meet up with Adlet and Hans."

Fremy clicked her tongue and kept on running. Earlier, he had looked at the crest on his shoulder. All the petals were still there, so both Adlet and Rolonia were probably safe. Goldof was relieved. They couldn't afford to lose a companion in a place like this.

Goldof and Fremy eventually reached the cave. However, Adlet and the others were nowhere in sight. There were just the dead bodies of the corpse soldiers and the corpses of two Kyoma.

"Really, where did they go?" Fremy asked, irritated.

"We probably just passed one another. We should head to the meeting spot."

Up until that point, Number 9 had been entrusted with protecting the area. But now that he was dead, the Kyoma at the Fainting Mountains were beginning to move, and perhaps they would come their way. They had to meet up with Adlet and the others as soon as possible and get away from the forest.

"No, I will search for a bit longer."

Fremy started to scan the area, but she couldn't find any messages left behind by Adlet or Rolonia for them. Simply put, Goldof and Fremy had no idea where they were.

#

When Adlet stopped crying, he, Rolonia, and Hans left the area, with no choice but to leave Raina's corpse right where it was. At the moment, they didn't have the time to dig a grave for him.

But Adlet promised to dig his grave after they defeated the Majin. He just prayed that his body wouldn't be eaten by Kyoma before he got back.

Adlet slapped his face over and over again, trying to drive the sadness out of his heart. He had to think about what they were going to do next, now that they knew about the Black Barren Flower.

The three of them were running quickly towards the center of the forest. Chamo, Mora, and the others had already left the forest and were probably on their way to the Temple of Fate. Adlet and the others wanted to follow them and regroup soon.

Unfortunately, the Fainting Mountain range was alive with activity. Noticing that Number 9 had been killed, the Kyoma nearby all seemed to be assembling to intercept the Flowers. The battle with The Dark Specialist was over, but they didn't have any time to even take a breath. They were still right in the middle of the fight.

"...Ad-kun, what about Nashetania-san?" Rolonia asked.

"What?"

"Why do you think Nashetania-san came at me?"

Adlet pondered the answer. His mind had already grown calm once more, and now it was starting to think as normal.

"Ad-kun, I don't know anything about any kind of Kyoma-summoning flute. I didn't try to make you fall into some kind of trap, Ad-kun. What should I do to get back everyone's trust?"

"Relax and follow me."

There was a time when even Adlet had suspected Rolonia, but that feeling was completely gone. She had acted for his benefit, and she was the one who had fallen into a trap.

"I wonder who planted that flute on me. If I knew that...." Rolonia trailed off in thought.

Adlet looked to Hans, who was running a little bit behind him. Hans grinned.

"If you're looking for the culprit, then I'm right here."

"...Huh?" Rolonia said in a stupid voice as she twisted around to face Hans.

Hans only smiled and waved his hands.

This guy went too damn far, Adlet thought.

"What do you mean? Is it you, Hans-san? Umm, are you the Seventh, Hans-san? ...If so, then why did you help us?" Rolonia asked, confused.

Without thinking, she gripped her whip and began to take a defensive position.

Without any signs of nervousness, Hans replied, "Well, Adlet was able to see through my perfect plans simply. But that is to be expected of the Strongest Man in the World, meow."

"But I wasn't screwing around, since Rolonia was about to die."

Rolonia was completely lost and didn't know what to do, so she stopped, standing still with her whip in her hand.

"Explain, will you?" she asked.

"Right, meow. First, let's hear Adlet's deduction."

Adlet sighed.

"You probably wanted to see our reaction. You would isolate Rolonia and drive her into a corner, then try and confirm how Rolonia would act. And so you used Nashetania. That's my theory."

"It's half correct. Actually, about 70% right, meow," Hans said with a smile.

"Um, I don't understand. Would you mind explaining from the beginning?" Rolonia asked, and Hans shrugged.

"...It's simple. I've always suspected you, Rolonia. Well, I suspected everyone other than Mora, so don't think you were special, meow."

"Huh?"

"Rolonia, you're close with the two most trustworthy people at the moment—Adlet and Mora, meow. And those two people aren't really cautious about you. For the Seventh, that would be a great position to be in, meow."

Hans continued to talk as he walked. "The Seventh fears the truth being found out. They've had many chances to kill all of us, but they haven't made a move. That kind of Seventh hates being suspected above anything else, meow."

"That's right, but...."

"Rolonia, you saved my life. After that, you did exactly as Adlet said. Sometimes there were some blunders, but there wasn't really any trouble from you. To me it seemed like you were acting in a way that wouldn't make you stand out or be suspected."

Rolonia had a blank look on her face.

Hans continued. "When I heard about the existence of the corpse soldiers, I was soon able to read Tgurneu's play. He's skilled in appealing to our emotions in order to lure us into a trap. But more than that, I figured that he might actually enjoy these kinds of tactics."

"Even in Mora's and Goldof's situations, Tgurneu used the exact same strategy. He exposed their loved ones to danger and manipulated their actions. With Mora he used her daughter, and with Goldof he used Nashetania."

"Granted, it depends on the opponent, but it's actually an effective tactic. In fact, sometimes I've even used such kinds of tactics myself, meow, so I really understand what Tgurneu is trying to do."

He grinned, and Adlet recalled that Hans was an assassin. He stole people's lives for money without ever blinking at the implications. He was a wicked person.

"I thought that perhaps Adlet would be the one caught in this trap, but, just maybe, Rolonia could also fall into it, meow. Contrary to my expectations, Adlet evaded the trap but Rolonia fell for it beautifully."

"Then I wondered if Rolonia was really falling into the trap, or if she was just pretending to fall for it and might actually be planning something."

"What do you mean?"

"For example, if you fell into the trap on purpose, you would pretend that you had gotten yourself into a truly desperate situation. Then the other companions would have to come and help you. During that time, Number 9 would get away, and you would stall until Tgurneu or the other Kyoma arrived."

"But, worse than that, you might have made an even gutsier move. 'Let's go help the corpse soldiers together,' you would say to coax Adlet and those with him. Then Adlet would fall into the trap and be killed. Afterward, you would then explain, 'It's all my fault that Ad-kun died. I am truly, truly sorry for his death,' or something like that while pretending to cry. In reality, I think it would have been a more skillful way to remove all suspicions from you, meow."

"When did you think all of that?"

"In that hut, meow. When you and the princess-san were bickering with each other."

In such a short time, he was able to predict that far ahead into the future? Again, Adlet was shocked by the sharpness of Hans' mind.

"So, with that, I decided to make the first move and conspire with princess-san. I planted the flute on Rolonia's body, and when Rolonia said that we should go help the corpse soldiers, the princess-san would reveal the flute. As a result, Rolonia would be isolated from everyone."

"If Rolonia was the Seventh, then being isolated would be enough to restrict her actions, since the Seventh hates being suspected after all, meow."

"That..."

"If Rolonia was the impostor, then all would be good. And if I realized I was wrong, then I'd have no issue revealing my plan to everyone. Regardless, neither choice would be a problem."

"....Why did you use Nashetania?" Adlet asked.

"Because Mora didn't seem like she'd be a good fit for this kind of work, meow. And there is still a chance that the others are the Seventh. At this point, the people that I could rely on the most, as strange as it sounds, are the princess-san and Dozzu."

"...I remember. After I argued with Nashetania, you talked with her about something, right, Hans-san?"

"That's right, meow. At that time, we were meeting to plan out our strategy, meow." Hans laughed. "After that, princess-san revealed the plan to Goldof. I also told Dozzu that the princess was going to trap you, Rolonia, but I reminded him not to interfere at all. Then, as you would expect, princess-san did everything perfectly, and Rolonia was successfully isolated."

"...Where did you get that flute?" Adlet asked.

"Ah, the princess had it."

I see, so that's how. It was a completely absurd turn of events, Adlet concluded, now that he heard how it had all happened.

"To tell you the truth, meow, I saw you, Rolonia, separate from Adlet and the others and act on your own. I was watching from afar in my corpse soldier disguise, meow. So I knew immediately that you had easily fallen into the trap, and that princess-san had done her role well."

Rolonia was speechless.

"That was when I decided that the chance of you being the Seventh was low. If you were the Seventh, Rolonia, you would have understood that you were being suspected, so you wouldn't have acted on your own. But I continued to watch you. You fell into a trap and you were driven into a corner, right up until the verge of death, meow."

"Wha...what was all of this for? I was really about to die!"

"I did it to confirm whether or not Tgurneu was seriously trying to kill you, meow. The people that Tgurneu has seriously tried to kill are most likely not the Seventh."

Conversely, if I saw that Tgurneu was taking it easy on someone on purpose, then they would be a prime candidate for the Seventh."

A chill ran down Adlet's spine. It had been a terribly dangerous wager. If it had gone poorly, then Rolonia would have died completely innocent; and it was also possible that by standing by and watching Rolonia die, Hans himself would in return have been considered the Seventh.

"I put off helping Rolonia until the very last second. I waited until you truly believed that it was all over for you, meow."

"You used the same kind of tactic with me, right?" Adlet asked.

"That's right. The face of a human as they are about to die cannot lie," Hans said and smiled. It was a smile that gave people the chills.

"At that time, Rolonia was in despair, meow. She knew that she had fallen into a trap, she understood that Adlet wouldn't reach her in time, and she couldn't use her whip. The face she made then was not a face that the Seventh would make, since they would be under the impression that they wouldn't be killed, meow."

Rolonia went pale, as if remembering her close encounter with death.

"I have killed many people, and I have seen the faces of countless people who didn't want to die. There is no way that I could mistake what I saw in Rolonia's expression then. So I'm sure that she doesn't believe she is the Seventh, meow."

Adlet noticed that Hans didn't actually declare that Rolonia wasn't the Seventh. He still believed there was a possibility that the Seventh wasn't aware of their identity.

"It was largely a haphazard strategy, but it went well. Adlet, you're quite the guy, huh?"

Hans was smiling, but Adlet's face was full of anger. What if Rolonia's rescue had come too late? What if Nashetania betrayed them and killed Rolonia on the spot? What if the Seventh or the Dark Specialist had done something unexpected? The Six Flowers might have suffered a devastating blow.

The plan had been way too dangerous.

"...Meow, Adlet? You're mad?" Hans suddenly stopped laughing and made a serious look. "Meow, Adlet. You're too soft. Protecting our companions is important, but we'll never be able to win by only doing that."

"But Hans..."

"There may come a time when we're forced to get rid of somebody, but we might not be able to find any clear evidence. So we have to gather more information, no matter how small."

"Even if that means exposing our companions to danger?"

"Of course. There are no safe paths in this fight, and our victory isn't certain. Am I wrong?"

Adlet couldn't argue with him. Up until just a while ago, none of them could even imagine the true identity of the Black Barren Flower. What if, when they finally reached the Temple of Fate, there wasn't any proof? As Hans said, it might not be the wrong choice to focus on gathering information now.

"Well, I hadn't even imagined who the Black Barren Flower could be, and yet we still found out, meow," Hans said.

Adlet remembered Raina's words. Those unbelievable words. The true identity of the Black Barren Flower.

"So, what should we do from here on out, Adlet?"

Adlet puzzled over the answer for a moment, before replying, "We should head to the Temple of Fate after all. The truth of the Black Barren Flower hasn't been completely proven. I don't want to doubt him, but even Raina's information cannot be definitively called correct."

"Will you tell everyone?"

Again Adlet fell silent.

"We shouldn't tell everyone yet. If the time comes when we should tell them, then I'll do it," Adlet said.

Even Adlet knew that was the lowest thing he could do. But if they were to tell the truth of the Black Barren Flower, then Chamo or Goldof would probably kill Fremy. Adlet couldn't make the decision to have her killed.

"Meowhi. As expected, you're sweet on Fremy, meow. You can't ask that request of us. Fremy should either be killed, or at a minimum, tied up."

"Wait a little longer. I want to confirm Fremy's thinking."

"You're going to let her go and watch her response? That doesn't seem like a good plan, meow."

Hans wasn't convinced, and Rolonia too was lost.

Then two figures ran up to them from the side. It was Fremy and Goldof.

"We finally found you. Where did you go?" Fremy asked.

"Aah, did you come looking for us? Sorry about that."

Am I acting calm and composed? Do I look clumsy or awkward at all? Adlet asked himself as he stared at Fremy's face.

"What were you doing?" she asked.

"We were looking for a way to help the corpse soldiers, but we didn't find it. Rolonia fell into a trap, but Hans rescued her."

Fremy looked like she was at the edge of her patience, Adlet thought. She turned and looked at Rolonia with resentment.

"I'm... I'm sorry, Fremy-san. It's all my fault."

"Meowhi, it's my fault, Fremy. Feel free to beat me up, meow."

Fremy ignored Hans' joke and redirected her gaze at Adlet.

"Really, you always, always...." Fremy was angry, but from her face he could see that she was trying to convey that she was concerned about him. Her eyes told him that she felt he was important to her.

But at the moment he couldn't meet her gaze directly because of Raina's last words.

"The Black Barren Flower is a Saint Instrument in the form of a human. She is a girl with white hair and a single horn on her forehead. And the look in her eyes is terribly cold."

The information was hard to believe. Fremy had rescued Adlet's life, and until now, they had fought side by side, but he couldn't think of anyone who could fit that particular description other than Fremy.

"...What's the matter, Adlet? Don't you have some kind of excuse?" Fremy said, noticing Adlet's averted gaze.

Adlet recalled all the faces Fremy had shown him since they first met.

The face that she had when she lovingly hugged her dog. The face that she had when she told him about her past being raised by Kyoma. The face she had when she told him about the pain of being discarded like trash.

The time she lamented that everything she had experienced with the Kyoma had just been false love, and the time she shouted at Adlet that being with him made her want to live.

Had all of that been a lie?

But at the same time, Adlet couldn't doubt what Raina had said. His close friend had given his life to tell Adlet. He couldn't simply ignore it.

"I have no excuses. I'm really sorry," Adlet said, and then he threw his hands around Fremy's back and gently pulled her into a close embrace.

For a moment it looked like Fremy didn't know what had happened. She then quickly recoiled and tore Adlet off of her.

"What are you doing? What's with you all of a sudden?" Fremy's eyes were wide open in shock.

Adlet just craned his neck to the side and said, "Did I do something strange?"

"Yes, you did. What's with you? What in the world were you thinking?"

Fremy's face had gone completely red.

Laughing, Hans said, "Meowhihihi, she's burning up, meow. If you can, I want you to do a bit more later, meow."

"...What Hans said. We'll do that later."

Within Adlet's chest he recalled the feeling of her slender body. Without thinking, his body had moved and hugged her. Perhaps it was because he felt that if she were to run from the group, then he'd never get another chance to hold her.

"Let's go. The princess and the others are heading to the Temple of Fate. Hans, explain what we've been talking about for me."

"Umeow. Got it," Hans said, and then he and Goldof ran off.

Adlet, Fremy, and Rolonia continued after them. Fremy's face was still red.

It's still too early to make a decision, Adlet thought as he ran. I'll do it after we finally reach the Temple of Fate and I completely uncover the truth of the Black Barren Flower.

Does Fremy suspect us? Or does she not know that she's the Black Barren Flower? Is there a girl other than Fremy with a horn on her forehead? Or is there some other fact that even Raina wasn't aware of?

I'll make a decision after I've made sure of all the facts. But when I make that decision, whatever it may be, I cannot hesitate about what happens next.

No matter how cruel I have to be.

#

"Oh, so Number 9 was just beaten, huh?" Tgurneu said in a carefree tone as he crossed the plains of the Wailing Demon Territory.

Dark Specialist Number 2 replied, "It was probably a long time ago, if the Flowers and Dozzu aren't too stupid."

"Well, for a Kyoma that was raised to recycle and reutilize waste, I think he did quite well. Yeah, I should commend him."

Tgurneu's main force was making their way to the Fainting Mountain range. It would probably still take a little more time until they arrived.

"Is the Black Barren Flower safe?" Number 2 asked.

Tgurneu stared at the Dark Specialist in puzzlement. "Is there something that could be a threat?"

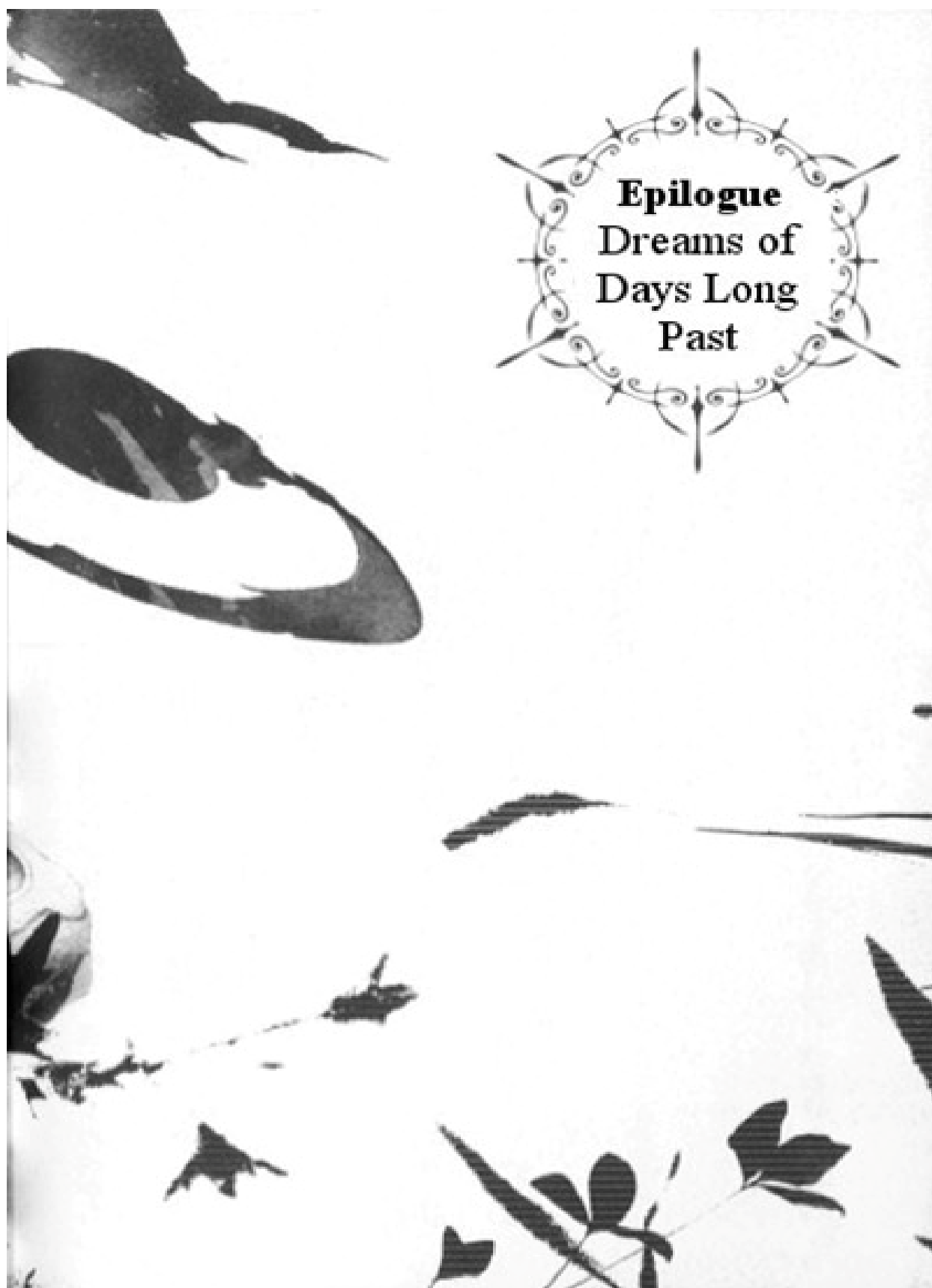
"No... there isn't, but..."

"Then she's fine," Tgurneu said with a smile.

#

So far the battle with the Flowers hadn't deviated greatly from Tgurneu's expectations. However, for the first time ever, certain victory was beginning to slip from Tgurneu and the Kyoma's fingers. But neither Tgurneu nor Number 2 were aware of that. As Tgurneu enjoyed basking in the sun, he continued to lead his forces towards the Fainting Mountain range without a care in the world.





Epilogue

It was about a month before the Majin's reawakening. In a corner of the land called the Plain of Severed Ears, there was a small hut. It was crude, with only walls and a roof and no form of decoration. And within that hut a single Kyoma was sleeping.

It was an ant Kyoma, though far larger than a human. Its stomach was swollen to an unnaturally large degree, its limbs were thin, and both its chest and head were small. Perhaps it couldn't even walk without dragging its massive stomach along the ground. But what was most strange about the Kyoma was that there seemed to be what looked like human breasts attached to its stomach.

And the Kyoma was dreaming. Just like a human.

It dreamed of a time eighteen years ago.

#

There was a room carved into a cave, filled with stuffed rabbit toys, drums that made a noise when you shook them, and plain blankets of various colors and patterns. And at the center of the room, there was a single bed.

It was soft and luxurious, the likes of which common people could never get their hands on. And a Kyoma was sleeping on that gorgeous bed.

"Hello, Dark Specialist Number 6. It's a great morning, don't you think?" A three-winged lizard Kyoma entered the cave.

"Good morning, Master Tgurneu. Yes, today is a fine day." The Kyoma that had been called Number 6 respectfully moved to the new Kyoma and returned the greeting, all the while dragging its giant stomach.

"No news?"

"That's right. Until now, I had been sleeping," Number 6 said, and in response Tgurneu turned to the center of the bed.

There was a human female baby sleeping there. As Tgurneu looked down at her, the baby opened her eyes.

"Ah, she's awake."

Tgurneu waved, and the baby pointed both of her hands at Tgurneu and smiled.

"It appears that the baby is more emotionally attached to you than myself," Number 6 said.

"Ahaha, you don't have enough love, Number 6."

Then one of Tgurneu's subordinates entered the cave holding a small puppy. Tgurneu showed the puppy to the baby, whose eyes widened in puzzlement. Then the child burst into tears, as if she had caught on fire.

"He- hey, hey."

"She's a cowardly baby. You can't show her new things so suddenly."

Number 6 picked the baby up into an embrace with its front legs, and the child instantly stopped crying. Tgurneu released the puppy, which wandered about without a clue as to what was going on.

As the baby clung to Number 6, she stared silently at the puppy.

"She doesn't seem to hate it. They will probably grow closer soon."

Tgurneu heaved a sigh of relief before saying, "Right, right. I decided on a name. I will go with Fremy after all. A lot of candidates were put forward, but the one I came up with first was the best."

"...Fremy," Number 6 muttered within its mouth. It was a name that smacked terribly of being human, but he didn't think it was bad.

"And I finally found out the name of the father. His name was Meria Speeddraw," Tgurneu added.

"So then this child will be Fremy Speeddraw."

"Honestly, you just *had* to eat him right after copulation. Couldn't you have at least heard his name before eating him? Finding his name took time I didn't want to spend."

"I deeply apologize. I just couldn't suppress my hunger..."

The baby—Fremy—hung her head on Number 6 as she cuddled with the Kyoma.

"Ah, it's fine. At any rate, the name has been decided. That's a good thing. 'The Black Barren Flower' is a pitiful name."

"Yes, you have given her a good name. Even she seems happy."

"Really? As far as I can tell from her face, she doesn't understand a thing," Tgurneu said with a laugh.

When Number 6 had given birth, dread of how ugly the child would probably be had rushed through the Dark Specialist.

Number 6 had known that there was no way a beautiful Kyoma could be born from having a child with a human. Even so, the ugliness of this child far exceeded Number 6's fears.

At first Number 6 had been uneasy. Can I give this child love? Can I raise this child and shower love onto her as Tgurneu had commanded? Can I even acquire this emotion called "love" that the humans possess? And even if I did, can I even love a baby this ugly? Number 6 had thought, *No, that would be impossible for any kind of Kyoma.*

"Fremy. Fremy." Number 6 called the baby's name again and again. Each time it called the baby's name, a feeling of joy welled up within its chest. *Is this what the humans call love?*

And now Number 6 didn't feel any uneasiness. The ugliness of the child was not a reason to be unable to love her. Number 6 was the only person who would ever give Fremy love, and that fact changed the Kyoma's heart.

I will never leave this child for all eternity, The Dark Specialist swore.

#

Back in the small hut, Number 6 opened its eyes. An old dog was lying down at the center of the dreary room with its head drooping to the ground.

"...Oh, isn't it time to eat?" Number 6 muttered, and then retrieved a plate from nearby. The Kyoma used a small wooden pestle to mash the corpses of some mice, then stuck the plate out to the dog, which promptly began to eat.

"Are you lonely?" Number 6 muttered.

The old dog snorted.

"I see. That child definitely wants to see you too," Number 6 said, and then stroked the dog's head with its forelegs. "You can see her soon. After the Majin awakens, that child will return."

The old dog growled quietly.

"It's okay. Master Tgurneu will definitely protect Fremy. Just relax and wait."

The dog silently laid down.

"Right... He'll definitely protect her, I know it. Master Tgurneu is really a kind Kyoma."

After Number 6 spoke, the Kyoma and the old dog sat quietly in the hut, waiting for Fremy's return.

Afterword

Long time no see. It's Ishio Yamagata.

Did you enjoy "Rokka no Yuusha 4"? Toru Kei-san's manga version of "Rokka no Yuusha" is being serialized in the webcomic "Super Dash and Go". If it agrees with you, I'd be happy if you would enjoy that as well.

#

It has gotten remarkably warm.

By nature I'm strong against the heat, and usually I can ride out the summer with just my electric fan, but recently some problems have come up. The apartment complex I'm living in has started a large-scale renovation. Because of that, it has become really noisy during the day and I can't open my windows. Nights are quiet, but I usually sleep right in the middle of the time they are working on the construction.

And so, closed off in my room, even my last ray of hope, my fan, is unable to help me.

If I open my window, I won't be able to sleep due to the noise from the construction. But if I close it then the steaminess would keep me up.

And if I turn on the AC, then I would be worried about getting a headache or a sore throat the next day.

By no means do I blame the people doing the construction. If my window is closed, I can live comfortably, so it would probably be unreasonable to seek any further reduction of sound.

I feel trapped with no way out.

I wonder what I should do.

#

Sometimes I go to karaoke alone to get rid of stress. Wetting my throat with beers or sours, I just do nothing but scream, and for a short time I am able to forget about the hardships of work.

In the world it is said that going to karaoke alone is embarrassing, and there seem to be people who avoid it at all costs, but I think they are missing out on the relief it could bring. Recently I've heard that there are some karaoke parlors that cater to individuals. However, there are still none in my hometown. I hope that they spread and become more and more popular.

By the way, my voice is terribly low and I can't sing on key.

The only way it would be good for me to sing would be to lower the pitch, but I feel like the popular songs to sing at karaoke are recent songs like anime songs, or Vocaloid¹, and no matter how high I try to sing, I just can't sing them well. And even if I lower the pitch, I get this uncomfortable feeling and can't sing pleasantly.

So when I am searching for songs that sit well with me, I always choose songs from the Showa Era. Now I am singing on rotation: Dark Ducks' "Woodsmen's Song"², Namajiki Miyuki's "Without even blinking"³, and Cyborg 009's "For whom"⁴; and when I'm singing I sometimes forget which era of human history I'm from.

However, even among this group of songs I've been singing recently, I'm still searching for a song that I can sing well.

#

And now for the final thanks.

To the illustrator Miyagi-san, to my manager T-san, to everyone at the editorial department, and to all the people who were involved with this book, I'd like to say thank you very much. I look forward to working with you more in the future.

¹ A popular voice synthesizer computer program.

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gyLWK9sOWzE>

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ccp0WO1h7SQ>

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W4CjzMjcM8U>

And to all my readers, let's meet again in the next volume.

Until then,

Ishio Yamagata

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